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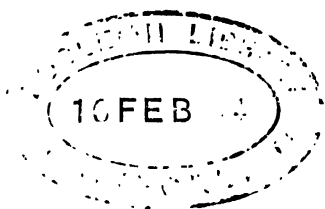
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THE CANON'S WARD.

CHAPTER XXXV.

UNMASKED.

ON their return to Albany Street, the Canon and Sophy sat talking over old times so late, expecting every moment Adair's arrival, that when he did come, his visitor had perforce retired to his own room to prepare for dinner. It was the habit of the master of the house to come in at the last moment, though that circumstance did not mitigate his indignation in case the meat was overdone. Adair looked worn and irritated, which, however, was by no means unusual with him.

'What is it now?' he exclaimed, fretfully, when Sophy came into his room. It was

plain, by the surprise in his tone, that she did not often intrude upon his privacy.

‘The Canon arrived this morning,’ she answered, sententiously. ‘He dines, and is going to sleep here to-night.’

‘The devil he is!’ was the hospitable rejoinder. ‘What on earth brings *him* up to town?’

‘I don’t know. Some little matter of business, he said.’

‘Tut! What does he know of business? He had much better stop in college, with his musty old Milton.’

This was a little ungrateful, considering what Milton had done for the speaker, and also sardonic; for if Milton, considered from the point of age, was musty, the other objects of study affected by the Canon should have been in an advanced state of decomposition.

‘I couldn’t tell him that,’ answered Sophy, ‘though I was well aware you didn’t want to see him.’

‘And I don’t want,’ replied her husband (his English grammar was not on a par with his mathematical acquirements). ‘Why does he come poking and prying about our house? Perhaps he’ll do it one day once too often.’

‘What do you mean, John? Surely you would never let him see, of all men, that he was not welcome.’

‘Oh, he’s welcome enough; as long as he behaves himself I don’t want to quarrel with him,’ was the dogged reply. ‘But I’ll have no interference in my affairs, if that’s what he’s after.—Shut the door, will you, because there’s a draught.’

Sophy closed the door, as requested, but left herself on the other side of it. Remonstrance with her husband at any time she knew to be futile; when he was put out, as was just now obviously the case, it was dangerous. She had long known that he had lost all regard for the Canon; but up to this moment he had never spoken of him with absolute

antipathy. What could he mean by that phrase, 'Perhaps he will come here one day once too often?' Was it his intention to break with her guardian altogether? She would then be friendless and isolated indeed. As regarded Adair himself, his words had no power to harm her. He was her husband only in name. She knew him thoroughly for what he was. Her illusions about him had not been destroyed, because she had never had any; but all hope of even that moderate degree of happiness to which she had ventured to look forward in their married life was over. She was weak, as we are well aware; but she was not a fool. Whatever happened of evil to her at his hands was borne without murmuring. 'It is my punishment,' she would wearily say to herself, 'and I have deserved it.' What chances she had had, and how she had missed them all! How the pleasure of her youth had turned to dust and ashes! Her charms, her wealth, the love of

kind and honest hearts, how they had all been flung away by her own reckless hands! That there was some new trouble in store for her was certain, though she could not guess its nature.

Adair received his guest with that mixture of warmth and deep respect which he always threw into his tone when the Canon came to Albany Street ; but, to Sophy's eye, there was more effort in it than usual. She noticed, too, that her guardian's manner was unusual—stiff and guarded. It was always difficult to the Canon to conceal his feelings ; but the remembrance that the other was his host enabled him to do so to some extent.

The dinner passed off without a hitch ; the topic of conversation was chiefly Cambridge, in which there were few discords. The influence of good wine, as was its wont, operated upon the Canon favourably. When Sophy left them, and the cigars were produced, he was certainly disposed to take a more

sanguine view of things. Though he began at once upon the matter that had brought him up to town—it had, indeed, been fizzing and seething in his brain for so many hours that it was impossible longer to suppress it—it was without heat ; his tone was quiet and conciliatory.

‘ I am come here, Adair, upon rather an unpleasant errand—a matter concerning yourself, but which I earnestly hope you will be able to explain to my satisfaction.’

‘ I hope so, indeed,’ replied the other. His lips smiled, but his brow had darkened ; his face had a resolute yet apprehensive look, such as a man might wear about to be attacked by more than one assailant, but who has his back to the wall.

‘ It is only an advertisement in a newspaper, but it has given me great distress of mind. I do not wish to recall a certain event which happened two years ago, or more ; you cannot have forgotten it.’

‘ Indeed I have not, sir,’ put in Adair,

quietly. 'I well recollect your generous conduct on that occasion to me and mine.'

'At all events, I showed very great trust and confidence in you, which you assured me would not be misplaced. You gave me your word, also, that under no circumstances would you ever embark in any undertaking which even the most prudent person could call speculating. In this advertisement'—he had taken the paper from his pocket, and pointed at the place—'I see your name published as the director of the Susco Railway Company, in South America.'

'True : but in British Guiana, you will allow me to add,' said Adair, suavely.

'Good heavens! what has that to do with it?'

'Well, if you were a man of business, Canon,' said Adair, smiling, 'I could show you that it had a good deal to do with it. Let me say, however, generally, that an investment in that country would be as safe as

in the debenture stocks of any English railway ; indeed, it *is* English. But, as it happens, I have not even invested in it. For certain reasons which, perhaps, you could not easily understand, but which are very valid and reflect no little credit upon my position in the City, it has been worth the company's while to put me on its direction, and also to pay me handsomely for the use of my name.'

'That explanation is not satisfactory to me, Adair,' said the Canon, firmly. 'It is true I am not a man of business ; but I know enough of such matters to be convinced that it wouldn't be worth the while of any safe and stable company to do anything of the kind.'

Adair shrugged his shoulders, and smiled a pitying smile.

'Really, Canon, I scarcely know what to say. I could give chapter and verse for everything I have stated about this Susco project ; but it is a long business, and if you will not take my word——'

‘I *have* taken your word already, Adair ; your solemn promise, in return, I must need say, for a very great favour, that you would never have anything to do with Speculation—that is, Risk. Do you mean to tell me there is no risk in your being a director of the Susco Railway Company?’

‘Not one atom, not a scintilla, I pledge you my word of honour.’

The Canon was staggered by the other’s earnestness and emphasis.

‘Well, of course, I cannot imagine for one moment that you are deceiving me. I must needs believe you. But still I do not like it. I must ask you to withdraw your name at once from the official list, and to give up all connection with the undertaking.’

‘Very good, sir,’ returned Adair, frankly. ‘Since nothing else will satisfy you, I will do so. I shall lose two hundred pounds a year by it ; but I need not say I would make a much greater personal sacrifice to meet your wishes.’

‘It is not, you know, on my own account,’ said the Canon, greatly mollified, ‘that I demand this of you. It is nothing to me whether you risk your money or not.’

A sneer passed over the face of his companion as these words were uttered. He played with his wine-glass, and muttered a noiseless something in a menacing tone.

‘If you yourself were alone concerned in the matter I should say nothing,’ continued the Canon. ‘A bachelor may do what he likes with his money ; if he makes a slip he can pick himself up again. But there is Sophy to be looked after, and little Willie. I will have no risks.’

‘I have never had to do with anything but the safest speculations, sir,’ said Adair.

‘Pardon me, but that is a contradiction in terms, my friend. A speculation cannot be safe. However, as you have passed your word to withdraw from this one, and—if I understand you aright—to enter upon no

others (Adair inclined his head), 'let us say no more about it.—This port is very good, Adair, and reminds me of our Trinity cellar.'

The matter for the present seemed settled; things were tided over, and the boat of friendship, which had been in grave danger, was got afloat again.

But it had been done, as it were, with a dead lift; there was no margin. Moreover, the reconciliation was not really genuine on either side. Though Adair had given way to the other's wishes, or had appeared to do so, he secretly resented his interference exceedingly. Malefactors of all degrees have been found to make a clean breast of their crimes save in one instance. No one, it is said, has ever owned himself to be ungrateful. Mr. John Adair was no exception to this general rule; but in his heart of hearts he knew that he was an ingrate, and hated the Canon as such men do hate the benefactors whom they have wronged.

On the other hand, the Canon was not quite honest when he had said, 'Let us say no more about it,' for the words implied that silence was to be preserved on all hands, and not only between those two, whereas he was firmly resolved to make a confidant of Frederic Irton on the morrow. He would be able to tell him whether the Susco Railway Company was what Adair had represented it to be, a respectable undertaking, or (as he still strongly suspected it to be) a bubble concern.

In the meantime he behaved to his host with such friendliness as was possible, addressing himself, however, for the most part to Sophy, and listening to her stories of the wondrous intelligence of little Willie with relief as well as interest. Making allowance for maternal exaggeration, the child seemed to be a very Malkin for premature sagacity. It seemed amazing that in such a father (for no one could deny to him the possession of great

intellectual gifts) such a daughter seemed to excite so little sympathy.

The Canon was so indiscreet as to rally him, though very good-naturedly, upon this circumstance ; upon which Adair remarked, in a very different tone, that 'he had something else to think of than infant prodigies'—an observation that did him more harm, and evoked more suspicion in the Canon's mind, perhaps, than all that had gone before.

It was with eyes more than half opened to the true character of his former *protégé*, and with an impression of the domestic relations between his ward and her husband which gave him infinite pain, that he took his leave next morning as if for the railway station. As soon as he reached Oxford Street, however, he put his head out of the cab window and bade the driver take him to Bedford Row.

The young solicitor gave him a hearty welcome.

'I only wish it was my house,' he said,

‘instead of my office, that this pleasure might be shared by Henny. Now, Canon ’ (here he assumed the legal manner), ‘what can I do for you?’

‘Well, it isn’t settlements ; I am not going to be married again,’ said the Canon, characteristically hiding his anxiety with a joke. ‘I am not even come for legal advice, but merely for your opinion as a man of business. A certain friend of mine is connected with the Susco Railway Company, in British Guiana. What do you think of it as an investment?’

‘For yourself?’

‘I don’t say that. Put it as generally as you please.’

‘Well ; such things are not much in our way,’ was the quiet reply. ‘Our clients’ investments’ (he looked up at the yellow tin boxes that ornamented the office walls) ‘are not, as a rule, in British Guiana securities ; but I do happen to know something about

the Susco. If I had not a shilling in the world I would perhaps accept fifty shares of such a company, as a gift, provided they were fully paid up ; but not a hundred, because that would put me on the direction.'

'And why not?'

'Because my name would be then made use of, and might induce ignorant persons to invest in the undertaking, which is, in my opinion, thoroughly unsound.'

'Do you mean to say it's a bubble company?'

'That is a strong expression, and suggestive of fraud. Let us call it a balloon company—it is all in the air.'

'My dear Irton, you alarm me more than I can say. John Adair, Sophy's husband, is a director of it.'

Irton shrugged his shoulders. 'That that should be a matter of regret to you, Canon, I can easily believe ; but surely it is not one of surprise.'

‘It has shocked and surprised me beyond measure. You don’t mean to tell me that it is Adair’s practice to mix himself up with such undertakings?’

‘My dear Canon,’ returned Irton, gravely, ‘it is quite contrary to my custom to interfere, unless I am professionally consulted, in other people’s affairs. Moreover, Mr. Adair and I are not on very good terms. I would therefore much prefer you to go elsewhere for information about him.’

‘But I am here to consult you professionally. I wish, for Sophy’s sake, to know the whole truth. Tell me all; it will be the truest kindness.’

‘I can only speak from hearsay,’ returned Irton, after a moment’s pause; ‘but it is a matter of common report—and has been for these many months—that Adair is a great speculator. That he has a finger in almost every new-made pie, and some of them, I am sorry to say, dirt pies. He is a man of great

ability but of overweening conceit : one, in my opinion, who would never be content with the moderate profits of a legitimate business. It must be admitted that he has peculiar advantages in the fact of his money being settled on his wife ; that is always a great temptation to such men to gamble. Ruin can never touch him, he has always his wife's principal to fall back on, no creditor can claim it, and that will assure him a certain income. These companies are unaware of that. He is known to be a partner in a respectable firm and to live in good style, and it is worth their while to purchase his name. That is the long and short of it.'

The Canon grew not only grave but grey; he looked ten years older than he had done five minutes before.

'Adair assured me with his own lips last night that he was connected with no undertaking except the Susco Railway, which, moreover, he stated to be a perfectly safe con-

cern ; " as safe as any English railway debenture stock," were his very words. Did he deceive me wilfully, or is it possible he was deceiving himself ? '

' If you compel me to give you a categorical reply,' returned Irton, with evident reluctance, ' the latter supposition is impossible.'

' He lied to me ? '

' Undoubtedly he did.'

' That is enough,' sighed the Canon, rising slowly from his seat. All vigour seemed to have gone out of him. He looked a broken man.

' I do hope, my dear Canon,' said Irton, gently, ' that you will not take this matter too much to heart. Mrs. Adair is, of course, quite ignorant, and therefore innocent, of her husband's proceedings ; and, thank Heaven, into whatsoever hole he falls he cannot drag her and the child after him. The law, so far as material matters are concerned, has made them safe.'

The Canon answered nothing ; his sad and lustreless eyes seemed to be looking into some Inferno of the future. ‘Deceived, deceived!’ he murmured.

‘Now, my very dear sir, I do entreat you not to let that annoy you,’ urged the solicitor, earnestly. ‘You have lived out of the world, but if you had lived in it you would know that to be deceived is man’s normal state. His only remedy is to consult a respectable solicitor, and he is not to be found in every street. Whatever the law can do for you in this matter (if you will trust me) shall be done, and with a will, I assure you. But it can do nothing (except in breach of promise of marriage cases) to assuage the feelings. What amazes me is that you should allow yourself to be wounded by the duplicity of this man. What else could be expected of him? Did I not assure you on the very first day I met him that he told me a most distinct and wilful lie about his being in a certain

place in the City (I've got a note of it) on a particular Tuesday morning? That, of course, was not his first lie, nor was it likely to be his last.'

If Mr. Frederic Irton flattered himself that it was an abstract love of truth, or hatred of falsehood, that caused him to be so vehemently antagonistic to Mr. John Adair, he was mistaken : what Henny had told her husband of Adair's conduct at home—his roughness to Sophy, and indifference to his child—was really what fed the flame of his indignation. In business matters no private considerations have any place, but they affect them just as strongly as if they had ; it is only that the lever is not in sight.

To the young lawyer's philosophic view of matters the Canon had replied nothing ; to judge by his sad preoccupied face, it is doubtful whether he even heard it.

'I don't think I can come up here again just yet, Irton,' he murmured, as they shook

hands ; ' I may want you to come down to me at Cambridge ; you will oblige me so far, I know, if necessary.'

' And much further, my dear Canon,' returned Irton, warmly. ' At any hour of the day or night, you may depend on my attending to your summons.'

He saw his visitor into his cab, and again the Canon shook hands with him ; not because he had forgotten he had already done so, but as if to assure himself that here was a man apt in affairs, yet of a kindly nature, on whom he could rely.

As the vehicle rolled away, Irton looked after it with troubled looks. ' What can be the matter with the dear old fellow?' he thought to himself. ' It is something much more than what he has told me, I'm convinced. He surely never could—no, no, that is impossible. Human folly is as deep as plummet can sound, but it has its limits.'

He was wrong ; it is unfathomable.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE THUNDERBOLT.

SAD as had been the thoughts of Canon Aldred on his way up to town, they were almost pleasant ones in comparison with those which consumed him on his return journey. In the former case he was not so preoccupied as to have been oblivious to the inconveniences of travel. He had felt the cold, he had been conscious of the annoyance and trouble to which he had been put. But none of these things moved him now. A fellow-passenger, shivering in the other corner of the carriage, inquired of him whether he had any reason for keeping the window down. He had not even known that it was down, or that he was

travelling thirty miles an hour in the teeth of an east wind.

And, as he felt no personal discomfort, so was he unconscious of any misfortune that his conduct might bring upon himself. His misery was caused by remorse for what his weakness — his culpable weakness — had brought on others. He would have been wretched enough had they been strangers, but they were very dear to him ; persons who had been committed to his safe keeping by the dead, whose trust he had abused ; and his agony was none the less because he had never dreamt of harming them. He was suffering, in fact, as Sophy suffered, from the effects of his own wilfulness (for he had acted upon his own impulse without asking the advice of any man) and weakness and folly. He had done, indeed, the very thing which Frederic Irton, with all his knowledge of the world, had said to himself that no man would be fool enough to do. No fatal consequences

need of necessity, indeed, proceed from it : the one thing that comforted him was the hope that they would not do so : but they might do it. It was not necessary to say anything about it yet ; it might even never be necessary ; but he felt that it would never be absent from his thoughts—never, never. How should he meet his sister with such a weight upon his mind and not let her perceive it? He had a letter in his pocket from her, received in answer to his telegram, full of disappointment at his stay in town, tender apprehensions for his health, anxious love and messages for Sophy and the child. Such letters as kind folk write, full of groundless though not fictitious grief, when there is really nothing the matter. It was only too probable that Aunt Maria would soon have cause to grieve, indeed.

He resolved to tell her something of the unpleasant impression he had got of the position of the little household in Albany

Street ; that would account for his bad spirits, and at the same time be a humiliation to himself. His punishment, as he remorsefully thought, could not begin too soon, though, alas ! he had not the remotest notion of the possible extent of it. Then, so soon as he had once made his arrangements for warding off the immediate trouble, he grew a little calmer, as often happens when we get our heads above the sea of calamity even for a moment : there now seemed a ray of hope. After all, matters might not be so bad as Irton had suggested ; and, since his own out-spoken words had not apparently been without their effect upon Adair, who can tell what a letter of urgent remonstrance and appeal might not effect ? He would write such a letter to him that very night. No one could say he had not the right to do it. And he would not mince matters ; upon that he was determined. While carefully avoiding anything like offensive language, this young man

should be told what he thought of him—no, not that, for that would make a breach indeed—but what he thought of his conduct.

‘My dear William, what *has* happened?’ were Aunt Maria’s first words. ‘I am sure it must be something very serious ; how pale and fagged you look!’

‘Nothing has happened, my dear Maria ; but I am certainly tired, and, to say truth, I have been worried as well.’

‘About business! Now what a pity it is you should ever meddle with business! Why don’t you get some sensible—that is, I mean, not a sensitive scholarly person like yourself—to do all that sort of thing for you ; Mr. Irton, for example ; it would save you a world of trouble, and money too, I believe, in the long run.’

The observation was full of truth, though the speaker did not know how true it was. The poet’s remark, ‘we are wiser than we know,’ would have fitted her to perfection.

The Canon winced as the random shaft struck him.

‘It is not exactly business which has annoyed me: I am sorry to say I found domestic matters in Albany Street not at all satisfactory.’

‘Is little Willie worse?’ put in Miss Aldred, anxiously.

‘It is not little Willie, though the poor child is no better. Sophy isn’t happy in her married life, Maria, and that’s the long and short of it. I am very, very much disappointed in Adair.’

There was silence for a little while; the Canon expected at least some expression of surprise, or perhaps (which would have been worse) not of surprise; some feminine ejaculation of ‘who can wonder?’ or ‘just what I expected.’

But all Aunt Maria said was, and that very gently, ‘I am very sorry, William; I am sure you acted for the best.’

Nothing was further from her thoughts than to reproach him. She intended to console him. Yet this speech wounded him even more cruelly than the other had done. It took the part he had taken in Sophy's marriage so entirely for granted. The remark was only natural, nor could the fact be gainsaid ; but it is one thing to accuse one-self and another to have one's offences pre-supposed by another.

'It has turned out far from well,' he answered, gloomily ; 'he is an indifferent husband and a careless father, and she is not a happy wife.'

'Poor Sophy, poor Sophy!' murmured Aunt Maria, tenderly. 'Well, well, it's no use crying over spilt milk. We must pretend, for her sake, not to see it, and we must not quarrel with her husband. It would add bitterness to her cup, indeed, should she thereby be estranged from us.'

The Canon looked at his sister with

affectionate admiration. He had not given her credit for such sagacity. If he had told her Sophy had been already cut off from Henny's society through Adair's dislike of Irton, he would not have been astonished ; but this prescience staggered him. As a matter of fact, no superhuman wisdom, but Aunt Maria's ill opinion of Adair, had suggested this sage advice. 'The man is brute enough for anything,' was the thought that was passing through her mind.

'True ; we must take care of that,' he said.

'Thank goodness,' observed Aunt Maria, 'it is only necessary to be barely civil to him. Self-interest is his god, and since you have some command of her money, that will always keep him on good terms with us. How dreadfully pale you do look, William ! How stupid I am to be asking you all these questions, when it is clear you are ready to faint for want of food !'

And she bustled out to get him a glass of wine, and to hasten the preparations for his luncheon.

Of the wine he indeed stood in need, but the food he found it difficult to partake of ; and as soon as the meal was over he went to his college rooms. He craved to be alone, for when we are in trouble the tenderest companionship, where confidence cannot be reposed, is irksome ; and there was also the letter to be written to Adair before the post went out. He had proposed to himself to write to his son upon that day, but with this weight on his mind that was not to be thought of. It almost seemed to him—the idea was a flash of despair, however, rather than an actual apprehension—that he never could write to Robert now as he had intended to do ; that he never could have the spirit for it ; he had had enough of bringing young folks together into the bonds of matrimony.

The Canon had the pen of a ready writer,

but it was over two hours before he had composed his communication to his satisfaction. It was embarrassing even to begin ; that 'My dear Adair' stuck in his throat ; the man was no longer 'dear' to him ; and embarrassing to end. How could he sign himself 'Yours sincerely' even, without telling a lie? But his chief difficulty lay, of course, in the contents. He had helped many a fellow-creature along the rough path of life, but this was the first time he had ever reminded one of what he had done for him ; ever appealed to his sense of gratitude. In this case he felt compelled to do so, and, indeed, he had done for Adair more than most men do even for their dearest friend ; 'I have not only helped you to the utmost of my ability,' ran one pregnant sentence, 'but even as we say here, *ultra vires*, beyond what the law in its strictness would perhaps have justified me in doing. It is surely not much to ask of you some prudence in return.' He

stated, though without giving the name of his informant, what he had heard of his speculative undertakings ; but he abstained from reminding him that in every such instance he had broken his pledged word. He spoke plainly, in short, but carefully avoided giving any personal offence. His fingers itched to write something of Adair's behaviour at home, but he withstood the temptation.

In conclusion, he reminded him, with a pathetic ignorance which should have touched the correspondent's heart (only he had none) more than all the rest, that he could have no personal interest in the matter on hand whatever, but was merely actuated by his love for Sophy and her child. 'If I have unwittingly said anything that pains you, forgive it, Adair, for their sake.'

It is one of the most hateful necessities of human life, that good and honourable men often feel themselves obliged, for the sake of

others, to use the language of conciliation to scoundrels ; it is never of the faintest use. They might just as well speak the truth—‘Sirrah, you are a vile hound’ (and, oh, the rapture of telling them so!)—at once ; but for the moment it seems to be of use.

When he had finished that letter, the poor Canon got up and rubbed his knees ; he had a sensation of having been walking on all-fours ; his brow was damp with the dew of humiliation.

‘There, I’ve done it,’ he sighed ; ‘I’ve held out the olive-branch to the brute ; even the hippopotamus is graminivorous, so let us hope he’ll take it.’

All things invite
To peaceful counsels, and the settled state
Of order, how in safety best we may
Compose our present evils, with regard
Of what we are and where, dismissing quite
All thoughts of war.

The words occurred to him quite naturally, and not till he had uttered them did it occur to him from whom he was quoting. It was

part of the speech of Mammon to the fallen angels.

‘Gad, if I had thought a little more of Mammon in this business,’ mused the Canon, ruefully, ‘it would have been better for Sophy.’ He posted his letter to Adair with his own hand, so that no mishap should occur to that, and then, not wishing to return home early, yet finding no restfulness, as of old, amongst his books and pictures, and feeling, for obvious reasons, disinclined to seek the society of his friend Mavors, he took a solitary walk in the Roundabout. This was the very spot, as we know, in which Sophy had been so imprudent as to give a meeting to her first husband ; a circumstance from which she could, not indirectly, trace all her misfortunes. It is not only our pleasant vices which scourge us ; but sometimes even our indiscretions. Little guessed the Canon of how the train for her marriage with Adair (for which he blamed himself as the sole cause) had been laid there.

It was winter now, but the place was full of evergreens and well sheltered : it was not old, yet it had seen many generations of scholars and students. They had been wont to walk there sometimes in company, but for the most part alone ; the young ones (just come into their fellowships as into a kingdom, and proud of their privilege of being there) full of hope, revolving each their scheme of classical and mathematical ambition ; the old ones (who had seen its folly) taking a constitutional and getting up an appetite for 'Hall.' The Canon had belonged in his time to both parties, without quite sharing the feelings of either. His thoughts strayed down the vista of departed years without much regret for them. 'I have almost got to the end of my tether,' was his reflection ; 'and, but for Maria (who would miss me, I fear), I don't care how soon I reach it.' The trouble which he had, as he felt, brought upon poor Sophy depressed him and made him very unlike

himself. He felt, as indeed he looked, much older than he had done forty-eight hours ago. He flattered himself that he was nearing his rest, whereas (if he had but known it) he was about to begin life again under changed conditions. All that he now beheld he would see again, but they would never awake in him the same emotions. He would have other things to think about.

At present the idea had not so much as crossed him that it might be so. As far as his own affairs were concerned, he did not even see the cloud in the sky of the size of a man's hand ; there was no warning. Indeed, what happened did not take place on the morrow, nor on the day after. It is generally so, when Fate overwhelms a man : she is sure of him, and is in no hurry.

There was no answer from Albany Street for three days. This silence irritated the Canon exceedingly, as well it might. That Adair should take no notice of such a letter

as he had written to him was nothing less than an insult. He had been requested to address his reply to college, not to 'The Laurels,' so that his correspondent might not be taken by surprise, and led into showing more feeling before Aunt Maria than was judicious. On the fourth morning, as the Canon eagerly ran his eye over the letters lying at his room (literary correspondence chiefly, with ingenious suggestions as to Milton's meaning, which, if correct, would have gone much further than was intended, and put him side by side in the category with the mad poets), it lit upon a legal document. It was enclosed, of course, but the handwriting on the long blue envelope proclaimed it as a communication from Themis. 'There were her very c's, her m's, and her t's ; and so makes she her great C's.'

'What the deuce is this?' he murmured, partly because he hated law, partly because he was annoyed at not getting the letter he

expected, and tore it open. The contents of it were as follow :—

‘ Sir,—We are instructed, on behalf of Wilhelmina Adair, the infant daughter of Mr. John Adair, of Albany Street, London, to apply to you as one of the trustees of Mrs. John Adair’s marriage settlements, dated June 14, 18—, for a statement of the property subject to the trusts of such settlement at the date thereof, and of what such trust property now consists.

‘ We are informed that the sum of fifteen thousand pounds has been paid out of the trust property by you to Mr. and Mrs. John Adair.

‘ According to our view of the trusts of the settlement, such payment ought not to have been made ; and our instructions are to see that the trust property is protected for the benefit of our client, the said Wilhelmina Adair. We must ask you to let us have the information required in the course of this

week ; and will be obliged if you will put us into communication with your solicitors, as, if we are compelled to take proceedings to protect the trust property, we do not wish to trouble you personally in the matter.

‘ We are, sir, your obedient servants,

‘ SINE & SEELE.’

The Canon stared at these words, boldly written and very legible though they were, as though they were some Belshazzar warning. He felt in his heart that they boded ruin ; but he required an interpreter to get at their meaning. As his heated eyes reperused the document, its own words, ‘ we shall be obliged if you will put us into communication with your solicitor,’ suggested to him the very person of whom he stood in need. Hardly knowing what he was doing, yet afraid to trust another with such an errand, he put on his hat and gown and hurried to the telegraph office, where he wrote this message :—

‘From Canon Aldred, Trinity College, to Frederic Irton.

‘Can you come to me by next train? Most urgent; reply paid.’

Then he tottered back to his rooms, and sported the door.

Half an hour—an hour—he spent the time he knew not how; but not in thinking: on the contrary, in trying not to think. All that he dared suffer his mind to dwell upon, lest it should leave him altogether, was, ‘When shall I hear from Irton?’

At last relief came to him; there were steps on the stairs, and a careless whistle. (Little do those telegraph boys know what messengers of Doom they are; the postman, by comparison, is a mere valentine purveyor.) The yellow envelope was dropped through the letter-slip, and the Canon seized it as some starving prisoner clutches his daily dole.

‘From F. Irton, London, to Canon Aldred, Trinity College.

‘I shall be at your college rooms at five o’clock.’

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RESIGNATION.

WITH the majority of men, when a great misfortune happens to them through the baseness of a fellow-creature, it is the private wound—the personal catastrophe—which they feel the most; but with nobler and simpler natures it is the baseness itself which most affects them. It is a revelation to them of a depth of infamy in human nature of which they have never guessed, and they start back from it aghast. It seems as though all their lives they had been walking on the brink of a chasm overgrown with brushwood, or even flowers, so that the existence of it had never been suspected. When it is suddenly revealed, the hideous suspicion strikes them that

the whole world may be full of such hidden fissures, that no path is safe, no friendship to be trusted. This unphilosophic state of mind arises in reality from a certain sort of philosophy (much accepted in these late years) which takes it for granted that, though there may be such things as 'good' and 'bad,' they shade off and mingle with one another by almost imperceptible gradations; and especially that there is 'a great deal of good in everybody,' notwithstanding what seems pretty strong evidence to the contrary. Even if folk don't go to that length in their fatuous charity, they will assert with confidence, 'You may depend upon it that no man is quite a brute.' That is, of course, true; but there are men much more unfeeling, much more selfish, and much more worthless than any four-legged creature. More cruel than the tiger, more brutal than the bull, and (ten times) falser than the fox. No one can doubt this who has had any really large

experience of life. The experience of most people is very limited, and they take their views at secondhand ; and, again, an experience may be great, and even varied, without dipping deep. It is astonishing how little those who have been in smooth waters all their lives (and have had no natural inclination to dive) know of the real nature of their fellow-creatures.

The Canon prided himself, and not without reason, on being a judge of character : he could detect a weakness with great facility ; he could hit off the various traits in his acquaintances with much accuracy and humour ; he could even, with opportunity, recognise a Scamp ; but he was totally ignorant of the *genus* Scoundrel. For the first time in his life, he had suddenly been brought face to face with a villain, and it shocked and horrified him, as though a traveller in a forest accustomed only to meet with marmosets and monkeys should suddenly be confronted with

a gorilla. He had been a great student, but never, even in his reading, had he come across such an example of utter depravity as was now presented to him in the flesh. Ingratitude of the deepest dye, falsehood unimaginable, fraud of the vilest sort, were only a few of the components of it; it was a mixture from which the Devil himself might have turned away, as being a little too strong for his stomach.

It was no wonder, then, that the Canon shrank from it. Alone, and with the haunting recollections of the past to intensify his disgust, he could not trust himself—urgent though it was—to think over the matter on hand. He shut it from his mind as much as possible, and busied himself in making such preparations for his expected visitor as would facilitate his understanding of the subject concerning which he had been summoned.

He took from his desk two little packets of letters, the larger in the handwriting of

Adair, the smaller in that of his wife, and arranged them on the table in the order of their dates. As the former fell from his fingers an expression of disgust passed over his features as though he were handling perforce some reptile or loathsome insect: over Sophy's letters he lingered with a look of ineffable pity.

'She never meant to harm me,' was his reflection. 'How terribly all this will pain her, poor girl! poor girl!'

Once he took up one of these letters and made as if he would open it; but, after an inward struggle, he put it down again, sighing, 'It will be time enough when Irton comes.'

He took the book of accounts—those very accounts in which Adair had made himself so useful years ago—out of its drawer; and a copy (made for him within the last two months for a special purpose) of the settlement of which he was trustee.

Then, with a sigh, he reached down his favourite volume from its shelf, and for a time, wrapped in the wondrous Tale of Hell and Heaven, shut out importunate Care and gaping Ruin.

The lawyer found him, book in hand, to all appearance composed enough.

‘This is so kind of you, my dear Irton,’ was his cordial greeting, ‘yet nothing less than I expected.’

“A friend should show himself friendly,” returned the other earnestly; then added, with a smile, ‘it is a bad sign when a lawyer quotes Scripture, but you must needs understand that I come as a friend.’

This delicate disclaimer of his visit being a professional one was lost upon his companion, or we may be sure he would have combated it.

‘I believe I never stood in greater need of one,’ was his earnest reply. ‘This is the communication received this morning which

has caused me to put you to so much inconvenience ;' and he placed in his hands the lawyers' letter.

'Sine and Seele!' exclaimed Irton, glancing at the signature ; 'what on earth have these gentlemen to do with you?'

'You know the firm, then?'

Irton nodded. So far as a gesture could convey at once assent and dissatisfaction, the nod conveyed it. He read the letter through without comment ; then observed, with extreme gravity, 'Can this be true, Canon?'

'Can what be true?'

'That you have paid fifteen thousand away of Mrs. Adair's trust-money?'

'To herself, yes ; at her earnest and repeated entreaty, in order to make her husband a partner in his own firm.'

'Great heavens !' cried Irton, starting from his chair, 'you must have been stark staring mad !'

A red spot came into each of the Canon's

cheeks. 'I see now that it was a very foolish act,' he answered, gently.

'Ten thousand pardons, Canon,' returned the other, with sincere contrition; 'any weakness that involves great risk appears to a lawyer madness—that is, to a young lawyer. As experience widens, the thing is too common, no doubt, to evoke surprise. It is possible, too, I should have remembered, that matters may have been left more than is usual to your discretion. Have you a copy of Mrs. Adair's settlement?'

The Canon pointed to where it lay.

'I am afraid that will not help us much,' he said, disconsolately. 'I was aware when I advanced this money that I was exceeding my powers.'

Irton shook his head; the gesture was this time one of pity. 'How could you do so?' it seemed to say, and not 'How could you have been such a fool?'

'There is not a word in this, I am sorry

'to say,' said the lawyer presently, tapping the document with his fingers, 'that authorises any such use of the trust-money as you have put it to. I suppose what you did was done under great pressure.'

'There are poor Sophy's letters and the man's,' said the Canon, wearily. 'Judge for yourself.'

The lawyer read the former first ; when he had done with each he folded it up and replaced it in its envelope with mechanical precision ; not a word of what was written escaped him, nor the signification of a word ; but it produced no more external effect upon him than if he had been perusing the County Directory.

And yet Sophy's were very touching letters. In many of them there was ample acknowledgment of the affection with which the Canon had treated her. Allusions to the past, full of tender feeling, with now and then, as it seemed, an involuntary pang of

regret. From none of them was absent some reference to his constant solicitude for her welfare, and in connection with it the earnest hope that he would crown his benefits by advancing to her husband out of her own money a sufficient sum to enable him to become a partner in the house with which he was already connected, but by a less binding tie.

‘This will put John in his proper place,’ said one of these letters, ‘and enable him to use more freely the talents with which I know you credit him, and which are at present hampered by his subordinate position.’

It was clear that the Canon had made a fight for it, for besides entreaties there were arguments pointing out not only the perfect safety of the arrangements suggested, but the advantage that must needs flow from it, which it appeared were so prodigious that ‘John would have no difficulty in repaying in a few years the whole amount thus so kindly

advanced to him, though when even that is done, it would be impossible indeed for him ever to escape being your debtor.'

'What do you think of those letters?' inquired the Canon, hoarsely, as Irton pushed Sophy's last letter under the elastic band that kept them all together.

'They remind me of the old Scripture, with a difference,' answered the lawyer, gravely. 'The hand is the hand of Jacob, but the voice is the voice of Esau.'

'You think that Adair dictated them?'

'No doubt of it. In some of them, where he saw that her affectionate pleading would have more force with you than his specious arguments, he let her write as she pleased, though always with a tag of his own; in others he suggested—nay, insisted upon—every word.'

'Do you mean that, in your opinion, there was actual compulsion, Irton?' inquired the Canon, frowning.

‘No doubt there was. I don’t mean to say that he stood over her with a stick ; but she was no more a free agent than if he had done so. She was not to blame—I am very sure you do not think she was to blame ; but “the trail of the serpent is over it all.”’

‘Read his own letters, Irton.’

‘I will ; though I can guess what they contain. Protestations of respect, the gratitude that is the sense of favours to come ; the most solemn assurance that the money will be as safe as in the Bank of England, and that anything in the way of speculation is foreign to his character and offensive to his principles.’

The young lawyer read them through, as he had read the others, but with a contemptuous lip.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘they are just what I expected, only stronger. He calls Heaven to witness to his prudent intentions. I wonder that didn’t excite your suspicions.’

‘But if it comes to a trial, Irton, and these

letters are read in Court ? They will surely damn him.'

'Damn him ? yes,' said the lawyer, with some unction. 'But what will he care for that ? When a man takes a step of this kind, do you suppose that he has not long ago parted with the last rag of self-respect ?'

'At the least, he must acknowledge the debt, however.'

'You may sue him, of course, for the money you have lent him ; but you may be very sure he has not one penny he can call his own. I have not the slightest doubt that he is in debt up to his eyes, and that there is a bill of sale out upon his furniture. This is the last throw of the ruined gambler ; and I am afraid, sir,' added the lawyer, with great gravity, 'he must need win his stakes.'

The Canon's face grew very pale.

'Do you mean to say that I shall have to refund the money which this man has so

urgently pressed me to advance to him—the whole fifteen thousand pounds ? ’

‘ I very much regret to say, sir, that, in my opinion, you will find yourself liable for the whole amount. ’

‘ Then I am a ruined man, ’ said the Canon, bitterly.

Irton walked to the window. The leafless trees and the cold river formed a scene which in its desolation was in too much harmony with his reflections. It was terrible to think that a man like the Canon should thus be stripped of means in his old age by this ungrateful hand. He strove to shut out what his companion was unconsciously ejaculating in a tone that would have wrung a harder heart than his. ‘ My poor dear Robert, your father’s folly has ruined your life. My dear Maria, your brother has brought your old age to poverty. And Sophy—poor little Sophy, whom we used to love so—how it will wring

your heart when you learn what you have done.'

Such expressions—that is to say, the giving way to the emotions for which they stood—may be thought to have been signs of weakness in the poor Canon. They were, at all events, not signs of selfishness; nor were they of long duration. He had a simplicity of character which has got to be very rare among us. Use was not second nature with him, because he required no substitute for the first; his wont had always been to be natural. Many persons in his position, albeit both his inferiors in morals and intellect, would, without doubt, have repressed these evidences of sorrow; or, if they had given way to them it would have been at the cost of dignity. With the Canon this was not the case. Frederic Irton, who lived to have a considerable experience of these scenes, which only fall to the lot of the family lawyer to behold, used to say that he had never seen a picture so

pathetic. And in two minutes it was all over ; through all that followed no human eye ever saw any weakness in the Canon. Indeed, Irton remarked even then an expression come into his companion's face that spoke not only of resignation but of a certain sublime content. His lips still moved, but the words did not reach the lawyer's ear. This was, perhaps, fortunate ; otherwise it might have struck him that among the engines of the law about to be set in motion against his unfortunate client there might appropriately enough be one termed *de lunatico inquirendo*. These were the lines he murmured :—

Undoubtedly he will relent and turn
From his displeasure, in whose look serene
When angry most he seems and most severe,
What else but favour, grace, and mercy shine ?

Then rising from his chair, the Canon, observed, with calm serenity, ‘ Well, Irton, at all events we now know the worst. I am in your hands. Let me know what is best to be done.’

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN CONSULTATION.

A WEEK has passed, uneventfully, so far as action is concerned ; but bringing great changes with it. Figuratively, the Canon has bowed his head to the inevitable ; but, to all outward seeming, he holds it gallantly. There are more grey hairs on it than there were ; to those who behold them and know the reason of their presence it is only more revered on that account. He has told Aunt Maria all, but has looked in vain for the indignant reprobation that was his due.

‘I have been your ruin,’ he added ; ‘my blind confidence and folly have brought me from competence to poverty, and have dragged

you down with me. We must exchange our pleasant home for one of a very different kind. You will have to pinch and spare, to cut and contrive, to eke out our narrowed means. At a time of life when you are least fitted for such a change you will have to occupy yourself with sordid cares ; and for all this you will have to thank your natural protector—as you imagined me to be—myself.’

He had said this leaning with his hand upon the mantelpiece, and looking down into her face as she sat in her chair, making a pretence to work at some small garment for Sophy’s child. Her fingers had trembled a little as she had listened to him; she answered nothing till he had quite done. Then she rose and kissed him on both cheeks.

‘ My dear brother,’ she said, softly, ‘ what you have said is very true, except the last few words. I have to thank you, it is true, for very much ; for a life of ease, of too much ease, perhaps—the very breath of heaven

has not been suffered to visit my cheek too roughly ; for a brother's unselfish devotion, for affectionate forbearance and solicitude—but not for this. Your goodness and generosity have been imposed upon, it is true ; but that is not your fault, but another's villany. For what has happened I thank Mr. John Adair alone—not you, dear. One can scarcely say ' (here she smiled a smile as sweet as that of the maiden who murmurs 'Yes' to her first love) ' that we have climbed the hill together, because the ascent has been accomplished (with your money, for I never had any) in a chariot with C-springs ; but we have always sat side by side, and now we shall descend it hand in hand. What does it matter, dear, since we shall soon come to our journey's end, whether we travel on foot or not ? '

As there is a nobility of nature's own, far beyond what can be purchased of minister, or inherited from another, so there is a beauty

beyond that of form and feature, or even which youth itself can bestow—the beauty of the soul ; and something of that divine comeliness now shone on Aunt Maria's kindly face, with its halo of silver grey. For the moment it seemed to the Canon that the revelation of such undreamt-of love and faith was full repayment for all his woes and worries. He had always esteemed his sister ; but, as he now confessed to himself, for these many years he had been entertaining an angel unawares.

‘If you have taken me for something even weaker than I am,’ she went on, noting the Canon's ‘hushed amaze,’ ‘have a better opinion of me for the future, my dear ; and now let us talk no more about our own misfortune, but do our best, since we cannot mend it, to bear it.’

The courageous behaviour of Aunt Maria had all the effect which she hoped for upon her brother. Mr. Irton, who had

paid more than one flying visit to Cambridge, and was there at that very time, was full of admiration at the Canon's pluck; for, indeed, there was nothing in his present circumstances to afford either comfort or encouragement. A reply had been written to Messrs. Sine & Seele to express his astonishment and righteous indignation at their letter, and setting forth in detail how the money had been borrowed by Mrs. Adair herself for her husband's use. But the answer, as Irton had predicted, was cold and formal enough. They had nothing to do with 'the parties' of whom he spoke, they said, but were acting, on instructions, on behalf of Wilhelmina Adair, an infant, whose moneys, as they had reason to believe, had been misapplied; and they concluded by announcing that the Court of Chancery would be at once applied to for the enforcement of their claim.

Over this letter the Canon and Irton were now sitting in consultation in the Canon's

rooms. All hope of defiance or even defence was over, however, and the conversation had chiefly turned upon the means to be adopted for realising the fifteen thousand pounds which would have to be paid into court. When it was done the Canon would find himself with a bare subsistence, that was all.

‘You think you were quite right in not having written to Adair himself?’ said Irton, tentatively.

‘Right or not,’ said the Canon, emphatically, ‘nothing should have induced me to address him ; there are depths of humiliation to which a man cannot stoop and hold up his head again.’

‘Yes ; I felt that I could not advise you to that step,’ answered the lawyer ; ‘moreover, it would have been humiliation in vain.’

‘I wonder whether he knows what a villain he is ?’ mused the Canon.

‘Certainly ; better even than we know it ; because this is only one of his knaveries. I

am much mistaken if the man is not steeped to his lips in them. This is his last lawful throw. Henceforward, unless he has such luck as will render it unnecessary, he will use cogged dice ; he will take to fraud.'

' You don't call this using cogged dice ? ' observed the Canon, bitterly.

' No, because he has still the law upon his side, and many examples of the like nature—precedents, as he would call them—to excuse him ; I remember a precisely similar case where the counsel for the unfortunate trustee, finding all was hopeless, observed to the Judge—" At all events, my Lud, you will admit that my client had no ends of his own to gain, and was actuated by only the most generous motives in advancing the money." " Certainly," answered the Judge ; " and if it is any satisfaction to the gentleman, you may tell him that there are scores of others who have suffered from misplaced confidence in their fellow-creatures in the same way." '

‘I consider that a very heartless speech from any one,’ exclaimed the Canon, indignantly, ‘and a most improper one from a man in the position of the speaker.’

‘He was a good Judge, however,’ said Irton, smiling.

‘Pardon me ; he may have been a good lawman, as distinguished from a layman, but he could not have been a good Judge. A man sitting on the bench of justice ought to have been ashamed of himself for speaking so cynically of what was, in fact, a gross mis-carriage of it.’

‘Well, it was not a pleasant speech, I must allow ; but he spoke the truth, though in a somewhat brutal fashion. Few persons outside our own profession are aware how many people are going about this world, and even sitting at their ease in it, who deserve to be in Newgate. Some people do so to the end, and die very rich, and, consequently, “respected ;” but the majority come to grief,

and meet with their just reward, sooner or later. This Adair, unless I am much mistaken, will be of the latter class ; he is very reckless as well as audacious, and when the pinch comes will stick at nothing. Then we shall have him.'

'I wish for no revenge,' said the Canon, calmly.

'Of course not ; when I said *we* I meant the law. Mark my words, that man will come into its clutches one day ; he will be a convict.'

'My poor Sophy!' sighed the Canon.

'By-the-by, that is another matter, about which, though we have discussed it, I have still some doubt. Though you could not write to her husband, ought you not to have written to her?'

The Canon shook his head.

'No, Irton ; I feel my sister's instinct was the true one, when she spoke to me on that point : "Whatever you do, William, do not let Sophy know."''

‘It is unwise to import sentiment into these matters,’ returned Irton ; ‘she should surely know how she has been made a cat’s paw of to injure her best and dearest friend.’

‘To what end, my dear Irton?’ replied the Canon, calmly. ‘If she knows, any word from me would only make her regret more poignant ; if she does not know, she will be the happier in her ignorance. No appeal from her to her husband would, we are very sure, be of the slightest use, while it would undoubtedly widen the breach between them.’

‘Still, she must know of all this almost immediately ; as soon as we take proceedings against him.’

‘What proceedings?’

‘Well, of course, when this money is paid into court, or even before—indeed, I have already put matters in train for it—we shall sue him for the fifteen thousand pounds you have lent him.’

‘Good heavens ! I never thought of that,’

said the Canon, rising from his chair with great energy. 'Why, on earth, did you not tell me that we had that remedy?'

'I really could not conceive any one—why, my dear sir, it's not a question of law, but of common sense; you have lent the money—though, it is true, you had no legal right to do so—and this man has borrowed it. Of course, therefore, he owes it you.'

'Then why have we made all this fuss about the matter? It seems as plain as A B C. A has lent money—B's money—to C, and can compel C to return it.'

'Not if he has not got it,' returned Irton, grimly. 'Can you suppose that Adair would have taken such a step as this if he was not already a ruined man? I am firmly persuaded that he has not a shilling he can call his own. I have made inquiries, and found, just as I suspected, that he has even given a bill of sale for the very furniture in his house.'

'Then what can be the use of suing him?'

‘ Well, there is no use ; on the other hand, to sit down under such an infamous wrong as this, with a mere protest addressed to the man’s solicitors, would argue some justification in the offender. Besides, it is your obvious duty—as, I confess, it will be my pleasure—to make things as unpleasant for the rogue as possible.’

‘ But that must needs involve unpleasantness for Sophy and the poor child,’ answered the Canon, quickly. ‘ No, Irton ; if anything of which I have been robbed could be recovered by such a process from the man himself, of course I should not hesitate ; but no material advantage can, by your own showing, result from it ; while, on the other hand, it will inflict injury on the innocent. I must, therefore, ask you to abstain from any such step.’

‘ I confess this seems to me Quixotic,’ said the lawyer, drily.

‘ It’s the ruling passion,’ pleaded the Canon, smiling. ‘ I have been a fool from

the first, you see. How worthy of Cervantes, by-the-by, this whole affair would have been ! How full of humour ! The idea of poor innocent Willie being my prosecutor and persecutor !'

' Yes ; the Settiky trust.'

' The *what* ? '

' Well,' returned the other, with some embarrassment, for he was loyal to his profession, and never gave occasion for the 'enemy to blaspheme' if he could help it, 'the fact is we have got no name in law for the antithesis of a trustee ; there is the reversioner, indeed, and the tenant for life ; but they are particular cases ; we have no general term except the "*cestui que* trust," a relic of the Norman-French, which we pronounce "settiky."'

' Do you, indeed ? ' said the Canon, grimly ; ' it's quite as like the original, however, as law is to justice.'

Though Mr. Frederic Irton was thus.

compelled to stay the proceedings he had initiated, he made it his business to inform himself very particularly of Mr. John Adair's affairs. His inquiries convinced him that these were in a desperate state ; that the man was over head and ears in debt ; and that his estate, bankrupt though it was, had become liable through his various speculations for enormous sums.

The difference between speculation and peculation is but a letter ; the partitions that divide peculation from fraud, and fraud from crime of all kinds are as low and as easily overstepped ; and when necessity sharply urges, they are taken at a bound. The lawyer's knowledge of this fact, joined, it must be owned, to his own vehement prejudice against Adair, caused him to entertain the keenest apprehensions concerning that gentleman's future, which disturbed him greatly upon Sophy's account ; but, for the present, he kept this to himself. To tell the

Canon would have been to fill his cup of sorrows to the brim ; and he was draining that bitter draught so bravely.

His Trinity chambers he, of course, retained ; a college knows nothing of men's circumstances, but keeps its gate wide open to all who have the right of entry, and gives the same welcome to prince and pauper ; but 'The Laurels' was disposed of by private contract, and its late inmates moved into a little cottage upon Parker's Piece, an open space where Aunt Maria professed to find better air and more sunshine. She never lost her pleasant smile, which she saw reflected much more often than she could have hoped for in her brother's face. When it was clouded she knew that he was thinking of his boy, and of that sad letter he had had to write to him, which, if it had not 'made cyprus' of his Alma's 'orange-flower,' must needs delay their happiness indefinitely. Sometimes, too, the Canon would fall into

fits of abstraction, which lasted so long as to compel his sister from sheer anxiety to break into them with a pretence of cheerfulness. 'My dear William,' she would say, 'what are you thinking about?'

On one occasion he returned (involuntarily, we may be sure) a most enigmatic reply :—

'I was thinking of poor little Settiky.'

'And who is Settiky?'

'Ah! to be sure. I forgot I had not told you,' he said. 'It's a pet name that little Willie goes by.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE REVELATION.

SOME people find it difficult to keep silence under any circumstances ; but total silence—just as tipplers say of moderation versus excess—is much more easy to preserve than reticence, especially upon a particular subject, when speech in other respects is free ; and the same is true, though in a less degree, of correspondence. To write a letter to one near and dear to us and not to hint at the particular topic which is most in our minds, is a feat in composition. Bluebeard's castle was not 'a bijou residence,' yet, huge as it was, he could not trust to Fatima's overlooking the chamber in which he kept those

‘trivial, fond records’ of his matrimonial experience ; and Aunt Maria, in ending her usual affectionate letters to Sophy, was always saying to herself, ‘I have been most careful, I am sure, yet, sooner or later, I know I shall let it out.’

Weeks, however, passed by without any such catastrophe, the very escape from which was a fact in itself deplorable, since it showed how absolutely poor Sophy was cut off from her husband’s confidence. That he had not thought it worth while to inform her that he had used her as an instrument to effect the ruin of her friend and guardian was significant indeed. It was clear that she must know it one day, however long deferred might be the date, and yet (leaving excuse and justification out of the question) he had not troubled himself even to break the shock to her.

One morning Sophy called on her friend Henny, with looks, not only sad as usual, but perturbed.

‘The child is no worse, I trust?’ was the latter’s first anxious inquiry.

Willie had been worse of late ; so much so that Henny had been a frequent visitor in Albany Street, notwithstanding that it was very disagreeable to her to intrude into a house to the master of which she was not welcome ; no considerations of a personal nature would have weighed with her where Love and Duty were in the other scale, but the reflection that Mr. Adair was her husband’s enemy did weigh with her. Nevertheless she went, to comfort Sophy and to tend the child. A man would have thought of his dignity, and kept away out of ‘self-respect ;’ but Henny did not think of such things.

‘Willie is no worse,’ returned Sophy, ‘though, I fear, no better. It is not on her account, poor darling, that I have come to-day, but upon another matter that troubles me only second to it. Oh, Henny, what has happened to the dear Canon and Aunt Maria?’

‘Happened to them, my dear?’ said Henny, trying to look surprised, and feeling excessively frightened but not surprised at all; for she had expected some such terrible question any day during the last two months. ‘They are quite well; indeed, I heard from Miss Aldred only yesterday.’

‘But they have left their house; so Dr. Newton tells me. I took your advice and wrote to him the other day about my darling, and he says in his letter—after promising in the kindest way to come up and see her this very day—that the Canon has taken a house upon Parker’s Piece: one of a row of quite little cottages. What can be the meaning of it, and why have I heard not one word about it?’

‘Well, they didn’t wish to increase your troubles, dearest Sophy, by telling you bad news. The truth is, the Canon has lost a great deal of money.’

‘How?’

A little word, but not so easy to reply to. Henny had almost all the virtues of her sex, but she was deficient in strategy. Cynics have said of women that though some of them tell tarradiddles with less grace than others, there is no such thing as a woman who cannot tell them at all. Perhaps the exception proved the rule in Henny's case, for she could not speak an untruth. When it was required of her, as in the present case, she could only turn very pale, and remain mute.

'You are hiding something from me,' exclaimed Sophy, vehemently. 'Have I, then, lost the confidence of every human being but my dying child? Am I quite alone in the world? I have deserved it, Heaven knows,' she added, dropping her voice; 'I have deserved everything; but my punishment is almost greater than I can bear.'

Henny's heart melted within her, as well it might. Her loving arms were thrown about her friend in an instant, and she burst

into tears. But Sophy, though she returned her embrace, did so with dry eyes.

‘I am tired of weeping,’ she answered, bitterly. ‘I have shed tears enough for a lifetime, and there are no more to come. I want to know the worst—the worst that is which has happened as yet. The worst I shall never know till I am in my grave, and receive the just doom of the wicked!’

The despair in her voice froze the other’s very blood,

‘Dear Sophy, don’t talk like that ; there are happy days in store for you yet. Heaven will take pity on you.’

‘You don’t know, Henny,’ was the quiet reply. ‘You have never angered Heaven as I have. Let us not speak of that. Tell me about my dear guardian ; the truth, the truth!’

‘I cannot, and I dare not,’ said Henny, desperately.

‘You dare not. Then it is something that concerns my husband. It is he who has

injured the Canon. I have suspected it all along ; this is the last and worst ——'

Poor Sophy never finished that sentence ; perhaps she had been about to say, ' the last and worst proof of his vileness,' or perhaps only, ' the last and worst of my misfortunes ;' but her emotions, only too well disciplined as they were, had proved too much for her. She had fainted.

To a situation of that kind Henny was fully equal ; and, without sending for assistance, soon restored her friend—though, as she sorrowfully reflected, it was doing her small kindness — to consciousness. Sophy's first words when she opened her eyes were, ' Now tell me all.' And Henny had to tell her.

It was done with the tenderest consideration. She prefaced her task with the Canon's absolute acquittal of Sophy herself, his certain conviction of her innocence of any responsibility in the matter in question ; his knowledge that she would rather cut her right

hand off than have persuaded him to do anything that might entail harm upon himself. He even stretched a point, and denied that Sophy had persuaded him. His wish to benefit her and hers had, of course, been at the root of the transaction ; but he had acted as he had done because he himself had believed it to be the best course to adopt. It was a mere error in judgment. She concluded her tale by saying that though the blow to the Canon had been doubtless a very heavy one, it had been bravely borne, so that its worst effects were already over ; and that the reflection that Sophy was distressing herself with vain regrets, and perhaps remorse, would only add to her guardian's troubles. Sophy heard her to the end without interposing one word ; but her face, which now and then she hid as if for very shame, was a picture of agony and humiliation.

‘Great Heaven!’ she cried, at last, clasp-

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ing her hands, 'how they must despise and loathe me !'

'On the contrary, they pity and love you, Sophy.'

'Give me pen and ink, Henny, and let me write to them ; let me write to them from here, your house—not from that man's house. Let me tell them that I know all, and still live to know it. Then they will understand that the fool who has done them this inexplicable wrong has not escaped her punishment.'

'Sophy, Sophy, remember what I told you,' pleaded Henny ; 'all that will only add to their troubles ; for my own sake I entreat you to be patient. It was especially enjoined upon me never to speak to you of this.'

'Speak to me! How can you speak to me at all?' cried Sophy, bitterly. 'How could you enter my house as you have done, knowing it to be a den of thieves? Your Stevie is there now ; I left him sitting by my child's pillow. There is contagion there for

him. She is a thief's daughter ; I am a thief's wife.'

It was terrible to see such fire and feeling, such humiliation, such remorse and agony, proceed from so frail and small a creature. What shocked Henny most was that last sentence, 'I am a thief's wife.' It was true of course, but that a wife should confess it—nay, assert it voluntarily—seemed to her, to whom the tie that bound her to her husband was only less sacred than that which linked her to her God, something monstrous and unnatural.

'Hush! hush! dear Sophy,' she entreated.

'Why should I hush? Why should I not proclaim him for what he is?' continued the other, vehemently. 'Why did you not mention the thief when you spoke of his crime? Because you would not pollute your lips with his name—the name he has given me—*my* name.' Then, perceiving her companion's pained and frightened looks, she added, with

passionate tenderness, 'No, no, no ; forgive me, Henny, I know it was to spare me.'

'Of course it was to spare you, my darling,' returned the other, earnestly. 'That is what we all want to do. You have been deceived, cajoled, but you have done nothing wrong.'

Sophy shook her head in vehement denial.

'Then if you have, the best reparation you can make to those who have suffered, the amends that will be the most welcome to them, is to forget it all. To behave as though it had never happened. To feel that your relations with those you loved, and never meant to harm, are just as they were before this misfortune happened. I have been to blame to tell you of it. Do not let me suffer for my weakness—for the love that compelled me to give way to your importunity.'

'I will do whatever those I have ruined wish me to do,' said Sophy, humbly.

‘ You dear, good girl, that news will indeed please them. There is another thing which I know they most earnestly desire ; do not speak, with Mr. Adair about this matter. It can do no good, dear Sophy, and will only be the cause of a quarrel or estrangement.’

‘ Estrangement!’ echoed the other, bitterly. ‘ How little you, who have a husband who respects and loves you, know the life I lead ! Respect and love are not for me. What were those lines we used to read together in the old times, those dead and gone old times, at Cambridge ?—

Others there are whom these surround,
Smiling they live and call life pleasure,
To me that cup has been dealt in quite another measure.

Estrangement ! Do you suppose, then, except for the one frail link of my little Willie, that anything binds me to that man. No ; not a pack-thread. If that link were to snap, and life were still left in me, not another hour,

when I had once seen my darling laid in her restful grave, would I remain beneath his hateful roof. I would starve ; nay, I would sin first.'

Henny sat aghast at her, shocked at these terrible sentiments, wretched in the reflection that the woman who entertained them was about to return to such a home, and to the man she must needs call husband. She ransacked her kind heart in vain for a word of comfort. There was nothing there but pity and sorrow.

'I must go back now,' said Sophy, wearily. 'Dr. Newton may come at any moment. Nothing but my anxiety upon my dear guardian's account could have induced me to leave home. I have been used to think that anxiety was the hardest to bear of all troubles ; but I was mistaken. Kiss me, Henny.'

Henny threw her arms about her friend and strained her to her heart.

‘Oh, if I could but help you, my darling —if I could but help you!’

Sophy shook her little head despairingly, and closed the mouth that once seemed to have been made for smiles and kisses.

‘I feel so wicked,’ sobbed Henny, to be so kindly treated, and so loved and spoilt, when you are suffering such terrible things so undeservedly.’

‘No, not that, Henny,’ answered Sophy, gravely. ‘Do you remember Hogarth’s pictures, which I persuaded you to look at, though Aunt Maria had forbidden me to do so, of the good and bad apprentices? As it was with them so it is with us. We have both got our deserts. If I could but feel that my fate would be a warning to all reckless, deceitful girls like me, then, I think, I could bear it; for I have deserved it all.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ cried Henny, vehemently. ‘All will come right again, some day, if there is justice in Heaven.’

Henny lifted her sweet eyes as if to invoke the power of which she spoke ; and when she turned them again on the place where her friend had stood, Sophy had gone.

CHAPTER XL.

THE WITNESS.

MAN is a selfish animal, but, in comparison with his father (as Wordsworth calls him), the boy, he is the embodiment of self-sacrifice and self-denial. 'No boy knows how his mother loves him,' says a modern writer, who has evidently studied his subject. 'No mother knows how a boy loves himself;' and nobody else knows. His devotion to that idol is without limit.

It must be admitted, however, that there are exceptions. Many boys who have not been to school and learnt the law of the stronger, are kind and gentle to their sisters and to girls generally, are not ashamed of

a partiality for that most charming of domestic pets, the cat ; and are even fond of children. 'The boy that loves a baby' (justly extolled by the author of 'Lilliput Levée') is, however, a very rare specimen. In this respect—namely, for the love of his small, helpless fellow-creatures—Stevie Helford was, as a schoolboy, almost unique. He had lost that precocity of intelligence, too often the companion of disease and the precursor of death, that had so charmed Aunt Henny, but his mind was still strangely mature and old-fashioned. At school, no doubt, in 'form' if not in 'gloss,' he lost his picturesqueness, and was commonplace enough ; but in the holidays he became in many ways himself again, to the alarm of his grandmother (who, having suffered from a mad spendthrift, imagined there was safety in the commonplace), and to the great content of Aunt Henny and the delight of Uncle Fred, to whom the boy's naïve but pronounced opinions upon the most

abstruse topics were an unfailing source of amusement.

It was as natural to Stevie to pass an hour in little Willie's nursery as it would have been with most boys to blow themselves up with fireworks, or out with greengages. He did not do it because it was right, or because his aunt wished it (he was not a goody-goody boy at all), or for 'tips' or 'sock,' but for the reason that is, on the whole, more powerful than any which actuates the human breast—because he liked it. Fido (Fred's dog) and he were constant companions, but he never showed himself so devoted as when Fido fell ill of an obscure mange and needed tendance. Again, when Henny's canary was moulting, it was difficult to persuade him it was not a malady which care could cure, and that he could do no good by sitting up with the bird all night. For which reason, and also because his Latin was very indifferent ('Ulpian at the best') Fred insisted upon

it that the boy was cut out for the medical profession.

Willie had been a great favourite of Stevie's from the first, but after the accident which crippled her there were no bounds to his devotion. He would sit by the side of her little cot, reading to her or talking to her for hours—nay, what is still more unusual with those who visit their sick friends, listening to her. He was not so fond of talking as he had been, or perhaps he had become more prudent in the use of his tongue. Uncle Fred was wont to ruffle his dignity not a little by quotations from his early speeches, which he now regretted, as a Minister of State regrets his utterances on platforms before he had responsibilities and took office. One of them, when cast up against him, had all the effect of a red rag on a bull. The subject of conversation being the popularity of authors, he had remarked, with childish gravity, 'I have observed that the Bible is a great deal

read ; I think, Fred, it would be a capital plan if you were to write another Bible.'

Poor little Wilhelmina had no such plans for the enrichment of her friends. She listened to all that was said with intense attention and sagacity ; but her conversation was mainly confined, like that of Socrates, to questions (Fred called her technically the Interrogatory), and some of them were such questions !

'Stevie,' she would ask in a hushed whisper, as the boy sat with his hand in hers by her curtained pillow, 'is it right to pray Heaven to bless wicked people?'

'One might pray to make them better,' answered Stevie, cautiously.

'I have done that, and it's no use,' was the grave rejoinder.

'Then I'd leave the blessing alone, Willie,' answered her spiritual adviser ; 'that's not your business.'

Here there was a long pause, during

which some pictures were investigated : you would have imagined the subject to be dropped ; but that was not Wilhelmina's way ; she might let go of it, but only as an Irishman may allow a bottle of whisky to escape temporarily from his hands ; her mind once fixed upon the matter, she was never satisfied till she got to the bottom of it.

‘ It is right to pray Heaven to bless your parents, is it not, Stevie ? ’

‘ Of course it is, my dear—that is, when you have any,’ added Stevie, with a sudden recollection that he was unprovided for in that respect.

‘ Then if you are to leave the blessing alone when people are wicked, and a parent is wicked, you are not to ask Heaven to bless him ? ’

The logic was pitiless. Poor Stevie, who thoroughly understood what she meant, replied, much embarrassed, ‘ You should ask Heaven to make him better.’

Then, with the air of saying ‘ You are arguing in a circle, and are confused besides,’ ‘ You have said that before,’ said Willie.

The idea of making supplication for Mr. John Adair had certainly never entered into Stevie’s mind, which was not as yet disciplined into praying for his enemies. He disliked him as much as he liked Sophy, and took care to time his visits to Albany Street so as to avoid meeting with the master of the house. If Adair had known he came so often he might have forbidden his visits ; but, as it was, he permitted them, because they amused the child as much as a new toy and cost him nothing. One day, however, when Stevie came as usual, Adair, as it happened, was at home. A letter had come that morning for Sophy from Cambridge, but in an unfamiliar hand ; and this had excited his suspicions. There was nothing now of novelty that did not excite his suspicions. A mind ill at ease with itself, and conscious of wrong-doing, is

always more or less in this condition. Even to the good man chance is a thing to be apprehended, 'how much more then to the wicked and the sinner?' When Adair heard from his wife that Dr. Newton had announced his intention of coming up to town that day, to see little Willie, his brow grew very dark.

'You must have sent for the man,' he exclaimed, passionately.

'I told him that Willie was ailing,' was the quiet reply, 'and that I should be glad of his opinion upon the case, as an old friend, and one in whose judgment I had the greatest confidence.'

'If he is coming as a friend that is another matter,' returned her husband, contemptuously (she had anticipated an outburst, and wondered what restrained it; she only knew for certain that it was no consideration for her feelings); 'but as for his opinion I wouldn't give a shilling for it. What can a mere country apothecary have to say against

the treatment approved of by such a man as Dr. Bagge? ’

‘It is said that two heads are better than one,’ faltered Sophy ; ‘at all events, when my child’s health and perhaps her life——’

‘What threatens her life?’ broke in the other, with angry vehemence ; ‘there’s nothing more amiss with her than has been any time these three years. And as for two heads, madam, let me tell you that in this house, at least, there is only one head. Never let me hear of a doctor being sent for again without my permission.’

To this Sophy answered nothing ; she never did answer her husband unless compelled to do so. Upon the whole, she was thankful that for this once, at least, Dr. Newton was permitted to come. Had she asked leave to send for him, she well knew that it would have been refused ; she knew, too, that her sending for him would anger her husband, and his wrath was terrible to her,

not only because she feared it, but because it reminded her of the mad folly which had placed her in his power.

She noticed, to her great disappointment, that he sent off a telegram or two, doubtless to explain his absence elsewhere, and remained at home that morning. She foresaw that there would be difficulty in getting speech with Dr. Newton alone. What could it matter to her husband, as she bitterly reflected, what report should be given of her child, or by whom, since he was absolutely indifferent to it?

When Dr. Newton arrived, Adair himself received him, and with some pretence of cordiality. He did not meet his gaze directly—it had never been his custom to look folk in the face, but of late he gave his profile to every one, as though he was sitting for his silhouette—but furtively scanned him with minuteness. He wished to gather from his expression whether he knew how he had

wronged the Canon or not ; and the deduction he drew was that he did know. As a matter of fact, the doctor did not know. The Canon had kept his secret from all outsiders, partly, perhaps, for his own sake (for he was not one to write himself down an ass, even though he might have behaved like one), but chiefly for Sophy's sake. The doctor, however, had no liking for Mr. John Adair (and showed it in his honest face) for another reason.

He had been informed by Miss Aldred of the accident that had happened to little Willie, partly in consequence of her father's ill-judged economy ; he was aware that Sophy had had money, and that Adair had had none, and he looked upon him as a mean hound.

'Some business called me up to town to-day, Mr. Adair,' he said, stiffly, 'and at your wife's request I have looked in to see your little girl.'

'You are very kind, Dr. Newton ; I am

afraid, however, you will say little can be done for her beyond what we are already doing.'

'At all events, there will be no harm done. I come here only as an old friend.'

'Just so,' said the other, quietly. If the doctor had meant to give him a dig, it showed no signs of having penetrated anywhere. 'You shall see the child at once.'

Sophy and Jeannette were both in the nursery, and Stevie also. When the boy heard Mr. Adair's voice upon the stair, he drew back behind the heavy curtain that shielded his little friend from the draught from the window, and remained during the interview unseen. Curiosity, however, compelled him to form a peep-hole, through which he could see what was going on.

Dr. Newton entered, shook hands warmly with Mrs. Adair, and sat down quickly beside the patient. He asked a great number of questions, as to symptoms, treatment, &c., and presently for the prescriptions.

‘This is all very right,’ he said, looking at one of them; ‘but I hope you are careful about the proportion of water; it is a dangerous medicine by itself.’

‘Dr. Bagge warned us of that,’ said Sophy. ‘We keep the medicine in the cupboard, and instead of mixing it every time, we keep a portion in the bottle here ready mixed. When it is finished, we mix it again, so that no mistake can possibly occur through inadvertence.’

‘Umph, that’s curious,’ said the doctor. ‘There are certain symptoms here—the very ones that have given you anxiety, and not without cause—which I should have attributed to an overdose. Who administers the medicine?’

‘Either Jeannette or myself,’ said Sophy; ‘and I mix it, when it is necessary to do so, with my own hands.’

‘Well, you can’t be too cautious. The limb is better—better than I could have

hoped for, considering the nature of the accident. It is the general health that is suffering.'

'Am I going to die, doctor?' inquired little Willie. 'I should like to know, because I have got things to do first.'

'Bless my soul! what a strange child,' exclaimed the doctor, whose practice lay chiefly among infants of a larger growth—undergraduates. 'Why, she reminds me of what little Stevie Helford used to be. No, my dear, you are not going to die; I hope you are going to get well and strong.'

'Do you think I shall live to be twenty-one?' inquired the patient, with great gravity.

'Ah, you want to come of age and see the ox roasted whole in Albany Street, do you?' returned the doctor, cheerily. 'Of course you'll live to be twenty-one—live to be a hundred and one very likely. What a very funny child! Well, there is nothing to be

alarmed about ; but the case wants watching. How often does your medical man come, Mrs. Adair ?’

‘Not very often,’ said Sophy, firmly, but avoiding her husband’s eye ; ‘once in three weeks, not more.’

‘That is not enough, in my opinion. The symptoms I have noticed should be attended to and checked at once. Have you had any other opinion—has any other doctor seen her beside Doctor Bagge ?’

Here Stevie noticed that Mr. Adair threw a glance at Jeannette, unperceived by the other two ; to the boy’s quick intelligence it seemed to say, ‘Don’t speak.’

‘No,’ said Sophy. ‘No one but our own medical man has seen her.’

Then the doctor rose and left the room with Sophy, her husband following close upon their heels.

‘What am I to do ?’ cried Jeannette, despairingly.

‘What is the matter?’ whispered Stevie, looking out from his place of concealment.

‘Lor, Master Stevie, I quite forgot you were there,’ said Jeannette, growing very white; ‘you gave me quite a turn.’

‘But what is the matter?’

The waiting-maid was too well acquainted with the importunity of youth to attempt to evade the question. ‘Why, my poor mistress wanted to have a few words with Dr. Newton alone; and I am afraid that she will never get them. Hush! be quiet, listen.’

The others had gone into the drawing-room and closed the door. Nothing was heard save the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece, and the occasional dropping of a coal from the grate. Fatigued with the doctor’s investigation, and lulled to rest by the silence, Willie sank into a deep slumber.

Presently there was a gentle knock at the door. ‘My mistress wants you downstairs,

Jeannette,' said one of the maids. 'Shall I stay with the child?'

'No, it is unnecessary; she is asleep.'

Then, in a hushed whisper, 'Keep where you are, Master Stevie, unless Willie cries,' said Jeannette, and noiselessly left the room.

One minute, two minutes, and then there was a cautious click of the door-handle. Stevie lay close, with a presentiment of something about to happen; to his horror, Adair stole quietly in. The boy's heart beat fast; but fascinated, rather than curious, he kept his eye at the loophole. What could have brought the master of the house back to that room alone? No affection for the child, that was certain. He stepped lightly to the foot of the bed, and gazed earnestly at the little occupant; then, having, as it seemed, convinced himself that she was asleep, he took up the phial that stood upon the table, marked well how far it was filled, and emptied its contents into some vessel he had

brought with him. Next, going on tiptoe to the cupboard, he took out a bottle, and filled the phial from it to the same height as before. Then replacing bottle and phial where he had found them, he glided noiselessly from the room. The whole transaction scarcely took up a minute : it would have been plain to any person of mature judgment that such dexterity could only have been acquired by practice. If but few opportunities had been afforded him for such proceedings, it was certain he had lost none.

Stevie stood petrified as he watched all this, and when it was over began to tremble. It seemed to him that he had been on the verge of crying out something horrible—perhaps ‘Murder!’—without knowing exactly why. He did not comprehend what had occurred, but he felt that if the man had attempted to give Willie what was now in the phial he would have rushed out and stopped him at all hazards. But now his nerve had

left him and almost consciousness itself. The contemplation of a crime by an innocent person is almost as shocking as the first commission of one.

Even when Jeannette returned, the boy still remained where he was, and without the power of speech.

‘You may come out now, Master Stevie,’ she said, cheerfully. ‘Mr. Adair has gone away with the doctor, but not before my mistress had a private word with him ; why master left us alone together, though it was only for five minutes, I can’t imagine.’

‘*I* can,’ sad Stevie, putting back the curtain, and disclosing a white face and staring eyes. ‘He left you to come up here.’

‘Here! Good heavens! He didn’t do anything to the child?’

‘No ; he left you to do it.’

Then he told her what had happened from beginning to end.

Jeannette listened, with horrified face. She

took up the phial. The medicine was as colourless as the water with which it should have been mixed ; but she took out the cork, and smelt it.

‘That would have gone nigh to kill her,’ she said, solemnly. She poured back the contents of the phial into the bottle, and, mixing more medicine with water in the proper proportions, replaced the phial as before. •

‘Now, as you love little Willie, Master Stevie,’ she said, earnestly, ‘not a word of this to my mistress or to any one else. I will answer for it that it shall never occur again ; but nothing must be done in a hurry. If he thought we knew of this, my master would kill us both, and the child, and my mistress too.’

It is probable that Jeannette did not in reality apprehend this wholesale slaughter ; her object was to make sure of the boy’s silence.

‘But we must do something,’ urged Stevie. He had as great confidence in Jeannette’s sagacity as in her honest intentions; and quite believed that any person who could injure Willie was capable of quadruple assassination. But he could not see how a ‘masterly inactivity’ could meet so extreme a case.

‘You must do this, Master Stevie: go home and ask your aunt to invent some excuse for getting me to her house this afternoon. Tell her that I have something very particular to communicate to Mr. Irton. If you can’t trust me to do what is best,’ she added, noting the boy’s hesitating look, ‘you can surely trust your uncle.’

‘Yes, I can trust Uncle Fred to do what is right,’ said Stevie, naïvely; ‘because I know he dislikes Mr. Adair, to begin with.’

‘And do you suppose that *I* like Mr. Adair?’ inquired Jeannette, with a strange smile.

For an instant there flashed upon Stevie's mind the remembrance of that significant look which she had exchanged with her master when Sophy had been engaged with the child ; but he put the suspicion from him loyally.

‘No ; you can never like the man that would have harmed little Willie,’ he said.

These words came hissing through her clenched teeth—

‘I hate him !’

Then the door opened, and Sophy entered. Her mind was too full of the events of the morning to take notice of how the boy had disposed of himself during the late interview. He had little difficulty in effecting his departure, since his hostess wanted to confer with Jeannette about the child ; but not till he had got clear of the house (which henceforth became terrible to him) did he begin to breathe freely.

‘Cram’ and competitive examinations burden young gentlemen’s wits in these days pretty considerably ; but never had boy so much upon his mind as Stevie had as he ran home that day.

CHAPTER XLI.

JEANNETTE CONFESSES.

JEANNETTE'S attendance upon little Willie since her illness had been almost incessant. She was not one of those domestics who grudge their extra service in time of trouble ; and, on the other hand, Sophy was not one of those mistresses who treat their servants as though they were machines. Though hardly ever leaving her own threshold, she insisted that Jeannette should take a certain amount of open-air exercise every day, and that this should take as much as possible the form of relaxation. When a note came from Henny, shortly after Stevie's visit, inviting Jeannette to take tea with her maid that afternoon.

Sophy was very glad of the opportunity of giving her the treat. She would be left alone with little Willie for an hour or so, which was a greater satisfaction to her than ever. Strange as it may seem, she had, in a fashion, communicated to the child the terrible news she had received from Henny. To make her really understand what had happened with respect to the Canon was, of course, impossible, but she had impressed her with the fact that a grievous wrong had been committed against this best of friends and benefactors, and that if it should ever lie in her power to make amends for it, her first duty, in the eyes of God and man, would be to do so. It was a foolish thing enough to tell a child, but then poor Sophy was not wise. Moreover, she had no one else to whom she could pour out her passionate sorrow and remorse for what had happened save this little confidante, who saw her mother's tears not as another child might have done, with mere wonder and awe, but

with the keenest desire to staunch them, and with intense interest in their cause. Though she had spoken of her father to Stevie, she had never spoken of him to her mother ; it was a topic that neither of them discussed, but upon which they were tacitly agreed. Sophy did not even tell the child who was the actual wrongdoer in the Canon's case ; and from what seemed happy instinct, but which in reality was reticence born of premature sagacity, little Willie forebore for once to question her upon the point.

While this loving couple were exchanging their confidences that afternoon, they little guessed how deeply they were occupying the thoughts of a certain friend of theirs, who, if he had made no sign of late of the interest he had in them, had by no means forgotten them. He had his own affairs and the affairs of many clients to think about, for he was a very rising young solicitor ; but ever and anon when tidings reached him of Mr. John Adair's

‘goings on’ (which they indirectly did) in the City and elsewhere, he was wont to swear softly to himself, and make remarks of the following description : ‘ You have stolen my client’s money, you scoundrel, in spite of my teeth—and lost it. You are stealing other people’s money (but that’s *their* look out), and losing *that*. As you get deeper and deeper into the mire, you take it out of that unfortunate little wife of yours for every failure of your thievish plans ; the more desperate are your circumstances, the more miserable you are resolved, it seems, that she shall be. Even the innocent child whom you have made a thief by proxy has suffered from your meanness, and—well, some day or another you shall pay for all this, as sure as my name is Frederic Irton.’

Irton’s character was not Quixotic (or he could never have been ‘ rising ’ in his profession), but he was swayed, as most men are, despite much twaddle talked to the contrary,

by other motives besides self-interest. Though he had loyally defended the action of 'the Court' against the Canon, he had felt that his client's case was a hard one, and his very respect for his own calling made him exceedingly resent its powers having been made use of to enforce a wrong. His wife, who had great influence over him, had communicated to him her own impressions of the tyranny that prevailed in Albany Street. Despite his calling, he had not so much patience with cruelty and meanness as lawyers generally exhibit (not because they are deficient in feeling, but because they think it shows a logical mind). If he had ever been called to the Bench, he would have taken what is called, I am given to understand, in legal circles, 'the d——d shame' view of matters brought before him, and been a terror less to law-breakers than to villains. Nor was a personal motive wanting for his hostility to Mr. John Adair; he had secretly never

forgiven him the lie which (as he was still convinced) he had told him on the very first day he had the honour of making his acquaintance.

Henny had not hesitated to summon her husband home by telegraph that afternoon ; he had come, as it was understood, to 'five o'clock tea' in the most ordinary and natural fashion, nor was there anything to excite comment in Jeannette's being sent for up to the drawing-room to give an account of how the little invalid was progressing in Albany Street.

First, however, Stevie had told *his* story, which Uncle Fred transferred to his notebook word by word as being matter of grave importance indeed, which might be wanted afterwards : but this witness, upon Jeannette's appearance, was directed to withdraw, while Henny remained in court to watch proceedings. The waiting-maid at first was very far from communicative ; she had had some hours

for reflection since the events of the morning, and her views were not what they had been when Stevie had left her. That Adair had altered the child's medicine, and with, of course, some evil intent, she was well convinced ; but she felt sure, being forewarned, that this could never occur again ; while to make a further scandal of the matter would be to entail she knew not what upon her unfortunate mistress. Moreover, should her master ever discover that she was hostile to him, he would turn her out of doors upon the instant, when her mistress and the child would be left without that protection which she alone knew to be so necessary to them. Like most persons with a turn for intrigue, she had too great confidence in her own resources.

Irton saw at once that she had repented of her offer to make a clean breast of it to him, and shaped his course accordingly.

‘What Stevie has stated to me is a matter so very serious, Jeannette,’ he said, gravely,

‘that it must be gone into, whether we will or no. An attempt to murder cannot be hushed up, out of regard to the feelings of anybody, remember.’

‘But why should it be murder, sir?’ she argued. ‘For all we know, the doctor may have altered his opinion, and Mr. Adair have done what he did by his advice. Besides, what good could master get by killing the poor little darling?—his own flesh and blood, too.’

‘When murder is done, Jeannette,’ returned the lawyer, coldly, ‘it is not only the murderer who puts his neck in the loop, but the accessory who is in collusion with him. No one who knows you could suspect you of doing little Willie any harm; but you will not be known to the Judge and jury who will try this case. I warn you, that if you are concealing anything that may throw light on this matter, you are playing a very dangerous as well as foolish game.’

‘I am concealing nothing, sir,’ said Jeannette, obstinately ; and then, with that superfluity of assertion so characteristic of her class, added, ‘I never did.’

‘What, not when you concealed from your mistress that another physician had seen little Willie besides Dr. Bagge?’

‘If you know so much about it, there was two on ’em,’ muttered Jeannette, grudgingly, but with a sob in her voice. It was not so much alarm upon her own account that had thus caused her to break down in her resolution to keep silence, but perplexity and distress of mind.

‘Then why did you, in collusion with your master, keep this visit secret from your mistress and Dr. Newton?’

‘Because I durstn’t speak of it,’ cried the wretched Jeannette. ‘Master told me if I ever breathed one word of it, out of the house I should go. How do you think my poor mistress and Willie would get on without me?’

What sort of husband and father do you take Mr. Adair to be that I should let him work his wicked will upon them? You may call it collusion; you may just as well accuse dear little Willie herself of such a thing, whom I begged to be silent about this very matter for her mother's sake; and she did so, because, child as she is, she has a deal more sense in her than some people as are grown up. And, after all, what did it matter about more doctors coming? They were kind, honest gentlemen, and, as I should judge by their manner, none too fond of master.'

'Just so,' said Irton; 'you were quite right in supposing there was no harm in them. Still, I must know who they were.'

'I know nothing about them, except that one called the other Woodruffe; and if ever master comes to hear that I told you even so much as that, whatever happens afterwards will be at your door, not mine, sir.'

'He shall never know, Jeannette, be as-

sured of that. If you will only confide in me we shall be able to spoil all his schemes, and make him harmless. But we cannot fight against him in the dark.'

'I know no more, sir, than what I have told you ; only remember that in dealing with him you have to do with the wickedest and most heartless man that ever drew breath, and one that is as cunning as the Devil.'

'You have described the gentleman to a hair,' said Irton, drily. 'What on earth,' he added, turning to his wife, 'could have ever induced Sophy to marry him ?'

Henny held up her hands, and shook her head. Though she was so fond of Sophy, the girl had always been an enigma to her, and the object of her affection a matter of amazement. Badly as Adair had turned out, he had not, in his bachelor state, been more objectionable to Henny than Mr. Perry had been.

'She married him because she couldn't

help it, Mr. Irton,' said Jeannette, warmly. 'Heaven forgive me for the hand I had in it, but I doubt if I could have stopped it anyhow. She did it to prevent an exposure.'

Mr. Frederic Irton emitted a low whistle ; a whistle full of feeling as well as significance, but still a whistle.

'You are wrong, Fred,' said Henny, firmly. 'I am quite sure Sophy never misconducted herself as you suppose. She may have been weak but never wicked.'

'That's just it, ma'am,' said Jeannette, approvingly. 'My mistress was very foolish, and bitterly, indeed, she has paid for her folly, but she never went wrong. She had a secret, which Mr. Adair possessed himself of ; and, rather than it should be known to her friends, she married him.'

'And what was the secret?' inquired man and wife together.

'She had been married before to Mr. Herbert Perry.'

‘What! Sophy a widow!’ exclaimed Henny, in shocked amazement.

Irton expressed no astonishment—it was beneath the dignity of his profession : but he murmured, ‘What a deuced clever girl!’ between his teeth.

‘But are you quite certain of this,’ Jeanette?’ inquired Henny.

‘I saw them married myself in St. Anne’s Church, in the City ; it was against my will from first to last. I had nothing to do with it except holding my tongue. I wish,’ she added with a sigh, ‘I could say as much of her second venture.’

There was a long silence. Henny was recalling the words Sophy had uttered during her last visit, the reproaches she had heaped upon herself, the acknowledgment she had so passionately made that her sorrows were deserved, and only her righteous punishment. ‘It was no wonder,’ she felt, and yet she pitied her, from her soul she pitied her.

Irton's thoughts flowed in quite another channel. Was it possible that little Willie was not Adair's child after all?—a circumstance which, though it could excuse nothing, might explain much.

‘When did the second marriage take place—how soon after she was a widow?’ he inquired.

‘About six months, sir. It was not my poor mistress's fault that it was so soon: the Canon hurried it I think, poor man, little knowing what he was about; and of course,’ she added, her hatred of her master stinging her into unaccustomed satire, ‘Mr. Adair was very anxious to make sure of her money.’

Here the clock on the mantelpiece struck six.

‘I must be going,’ said Jeannette, rising; ‘if my master comes back and finds me away from home—and especially here—he will suspect something.’

‘Quite right,’ said Irton, approvingly; ‘we must contrive to see you again, when necessary; but in the meantime we cannot be too cautious. One moment; how do you know that Mr. Adair knew your mistress was a widow? Did he ever say so in your hearing?’

‘No, but it was very well understood between them.’

‘Still you have no evidence that he knew it?’

‘He knew it,’ said Jeannette, after a moment’s reflection, ‘because he read a letter of Mr. Perry’s which spoke of his marriage, and he enclosed it with a letter of his own to my mistress.’

‘Is that letter—Adair’s letter—in existence?’

‘I think it is.’

‘I will give fifty pounds for a sight of it.’

‘I don’t want your money, sir,’ said

Jeannette, doggedly ; ‘ I have had enough of doing underhand things for money.’

‘ But this is work for a good end, work that may possibly be the means of rescuing your mistress from her slavery, as well as causing your master to get his deserts.’

‘ That would be a sight for sore eyes indeed,’ answered Jeannette, earnestly, mopping her own with her handkerchief, as she arose from her chair. ‘ You shall have that letter, sir, if I have to break open missus’s desk to get at it.’

CHAPTER XLII.

ROBERT.

THE P. and O. boat has just arrived at Southampton. Her deck is crowded by a motley crowd, but the expression of their faces is, for the most part, wonderfully similar. There are some invalids, so ill that even the thought of 'coming home' cannot bring back 'the vermeil hue of health' to their bronzed but shrunken cheeks ; there is a glitter in their eyes, but it has moisture in it, like the light of the sun-dew. And there are others in mourning, who have been beckoned across the ocean by the hand of death. The rest are bright and radiant : some eager to revisit their own homes, others chiefly to enjoy themselves after long and enforced abstinence from

pleasure, in 'the village,' as we term, with mock sentiment, the metropolis.

There is one exception, however ; a young man, neither an invalid nor in mourning, but who wears a grave and preoccupied expression. He does not scan the faces of those ashore who have come to meet the boat ; he has friends, dear ones at home ; but he knows that no one will be here to welcome him, for they do not know of his arrival. His fellow-passengers crowd around him to shake hands of farewell, for he has made himself popular on the voyage ; he accepts their civilities and reciprocates them, but with a somewhat *distrain* air ; his mind is far from them. He is glad when they have streamed away, and he can follow after them and mix unobserved with the crowd at the railway station. It is early spring, and the darkness of evening is already falling.

'First class, sir?' inquires the porter, who is looking after his luggage.

‘No ; third class.’

The porter stares, for the young man is well dressed and has an aristocratic air, and notwithstanding this discovery he shows him to his carriage.

‘I thought so,’ murmurs the official, as he leaves the door with a shilling in his hand ; ‘once a gentleman always a gentleman. Now, some fools would have said, “There’s your carriage,” and taken no further notice of him. He’s out o’ luck, that’s all, and I hope it will return to him.’

The subject of this aspiration pulled his railway rug around him, pushed up his coat-collar, drew down his travelling-cap over his brows, and prepared himself for silence, if not for slumber. He was in no mood for talk, nor, in any case, would the appearance of his fellow-passengers have invited conversation. There were but two of them ; one a rough-looking fellow ; but without the wholesomeness that often accompanies roughness ; the

other with the appearance of having seen better days, the remembrance of which he had made efforts to drown in the usual manner ; they spoke to one another in hoarse whispers, and seemed to be on intimate terms — what the world at large calls friends, and the sporting world ‘ confederates.’ Presently one of them produced a huge spirit flask, which drew the ties of their amity still closer and still more loosed their tongues. They had seemed at first to be suspicious of their silent companion, but, as he gave no sign of wakefulness, they soon disregarded him. As appeared from their talk, they had recently returned from some distant land, where, though they had accomplished their errand, they had encountered some hardships, spent all their money, and received some slight which had wounded their *amour propre*.

‘ What I hate, most of all, in the governor,’ said No. 1, in discontented tones, ‘ is his want of confidence in a fellow. Wherever one goes

there is always some one else going, unbeknownst, to look after one.'

'That's his kind consideration for our welfare,' returned No. 2, whose language showed a much higher type of education than that of his companion. 'He's so fond of you he can never trust you out of his sight.'

'He don't trust you a bit more than he does me; don't think it,' sneered No. 1.

Why, you was searched twice between the mine and the 'otel.'

'But nothing was found upon me, my friend; I left the court without a stain upon my character, whereas you——dear me, I felt quite ashamed that a pal of mine should have so bemeaned himself for a few ounces of silver.'

'I am not a hostrich, like some people, as can swaller silver,' returned the other, angrily. 'For my part, I wonder you don't jingle as you move.'

'And a very pleasant music it would make,'

returned the other. 'Automaton pianos would be nothing to it; there is only one pleasanter chink to my ear—that of gold.'

'It's high time we heard it,' grumbled No. 1. 'The idea of our havin' to come home in the steerage, and now in this 'ere third class, with the tagrag and bobtail;' and he nodded his head in the direction of their sleeping companion to illustrate his remark by application. 'Fellows as have done what we have done to our employers' satisfaction.'

'It was the euchre, however, to give the devil his due, which took away our ready money,' observed No. 2. 'The governor has behaved square enough.'

'And so he ought to do,' answered the other, angrily. 'For every ten pounds he has put into our pockets he expects to land a 'thou' at the very least.'

'That depends upon how the company stands. Without the help of that swell in the City the wheels could never have been moved

at all ; and it's my opinion he has not much money to grease 'em with.'

'But he knows where to get it,' observed No. 1, 'and he won't be so particular how it's got.'

'Got ? who is ?' returned the other, contemptuously ; 'but let me tell you it's not so easy as Dawson thinks for a swell in the City, if he has been once blown upon, to raise 12,000*l.* anyhow. And Master John Adair's reputation is not virgin ; no, nor anything like it—'um !'

This inarticulate sound was a note of warning. The young gentleman in the corner had suddenly given a start, which was perceptible through his wraps. Nor though he feigned to strike out a limb mechanically as though it were part and parcel of the other performance, and to breathe heavily, like one fast bound in slumber, did he succeed in lulling the once aroused suspicion of his companions. He overheard, indeed, No. 1 anathe-

matising No. 2 in a muttered tone for being such a blank fool as to name names in a public conveyance, and No. 2 defending himself with the vehement irascibility of a man who knows he is in the wrong ; but their confidential communications were over. Only one other observation passed between them from which any information could be gathered. As they neared the end of their journey No. 2 bought a newspaper, and produced from his pocket a small lantern, by means of which he contrived to spell out a word or two, though the chief effect of the light was to illumine his own countenance in a Rembrandtish and unattractive fashion.

‘ Well ; what’s the noose ? ’ inquired his more illiterate companion.

‘ None. There are no quotations yet, of course.’

‘ Why, I thought they was a laying five or six to one against the Briar-root filly.’

‘ Tut ! your mind is always feeding on

horseflesh,' returned the other, contemptuously. 'I meant there are no quotations of the S.S., stupid.'

Not till the train stopped at the ticket platform did the young gentleman in the corner begin to awaken, which he did with much yawning and stretching; one would have said that he had either been undergoing great bodily fatigue of late, or must have been a very lazy man indeed. No sooner had he parted from his companions, however, and found himself in a cab, than all trace of sleepiness vanished. There was an angry light in his eye, and an angry ring in his voice, as he exclaimed to himself—

'That man again! How strange that his cursed name is the first to meet my ear in England! What scoundrels those two fellows looked! His accomplices, no doubt, in some scheme of villany. It is too late to get on to-night, and I can't stop all these hours alone, eating my heart out with bitter thoughts. No

donbt Henny will give me a bit of supper, and—what I crave for infinitely more—some news of Cambridge. Her husband is a clever fellow, by all accounts, and his advice may be worth having.’

He put his head out of window, and substituted for the address he had first given to the cabman that of the Irtons’ house in Maida Vale.

It was past eight when the cab drew up at the door ; he rang the bell, and gave his card to the servant for Mrs. Irton. Henny was still in the dining-room, where her husband was smoking his after-dinner pipe (she was much too good a wife and wise a woman to object to the smell of tobacco). She read the card, jumped up with a cry of pleasure, and ran into the passage, where Mr. Frederic Irton heard her exclaim, tumultuously, ‘ You dear, good fellow ! ’ These words, so distressing to a husband’s ear, were followed by an unmistakable kiss.

The next moment she reappeared, leading by the hand a very handsome young man, looking not so much ashamed of himself as embarrassed.

‘I owe you an apology, Mr. Irton,’ he began, smiling.

‘It’s quite out of the question,’ said the lawyer, gravely. ‘The matter must go to a jury, who will assess damages.’

‘Why, it’s Robert,’ cried Henny; ‘Robert Aldred, from India: I knew he’d come;’ and then this extraordinary young person, who had quite a reputation for self-control, burst into tears.

‘I am very glad to see Robert,’ said Irton, shaking hands with the new comer warmly. ‘This is indeed friendly of you. You are come to stay with us, of course.’

‘Nay, I was going to Cambridge this very night, but found I was too late; so I just looked in.’

Henny was in the passage again in an

instant, giving orders about his luggage being taken down, and carried to the spare room.

‘You will have to stay, Aldred,’ said Irton, smiling. ‘If I were master here I would add “and welcome” ; but Henny presides over the establishment. This sad news of the Canon has brought you over, I conclude?’

‘Yes ; I am come on short leave instead of long ; but I could not leave him to bear his misfortune alone.’

‘I have always heard you were a good fellow, and now I’m sure of it,’ exclaimed the lawyer, approvingly ; ‘sit down, and you shall have some dinner at once.’

In Henny’s house matters were never run so finely that there was difficulty in suitably providing for an unexpected guest ; and if viands were not wanting on the occasion, we may be sure there was still less lack of conversation.

The three sat far into the night, conferring

and discoursing on many things ; and, as generally happens when a traveller has come from the ends of the earth, the first topic of Robert's talk was upon his latest comparatively unimportant experience in the railway carriage.

‘How odd it was that I should hear of this Adair so soon ; was it not?’ he said.

‘Well, a good many people are talking about him, and none to his credit,’ replied Irton. ‘I have no doubt, as you suggest, that the men are engaged in some scheme—probably a nefarious one—in which he is interested. I dare say it's no worse than many another in which he is mixed up. But I'll just make a note of the expected quotation of those S.S. shares.’

‘And don't you think his having to find 12,000*l.*, apparently at some early date, was rather significant?’

‘Why, yes. I've got that down already,’ returned the lawyer, drily. ‘It's evident that

he's approaching a crisis—probably a very dangerous one.'

'He can't do my poor father any more harm ; that's one comfort,' observed Robert, grimly.

'No ; he can't do him any more harm,' said the lawyer, slowly. Perhaps he was thinking of the Canon's wrongs, as Robert was doing ; for both remained silent for a little while, with compressed lips ; or perhaps he was thinking, 'Though he can't hurt your father more, he may hurt others.'

'It is quite marvellous how well the dear Canon and Miss Aldred have borne it all,' observed Henny. 'Of course your coming will be an immense delight and comfort to them ; but it was not really necessary.'

'Alma thought it was,' said Robert, simply. 'So far from combating my resolution to come home, she said it was my obvious duty.'

'You have got her portrait, of course ?'

said Henny, gently. 'You must let me see it before you leave us.'

'I have got it here,' answered Robert, with a blush; and he produced it from his breast-pocket.

At this, Henny's look grew so very tender that Irton interposed with, 'You really mustn't kiss him again;' which made them both laugh very heartily. In reality, Irton had not the least objection to their kissing; but he was averse to sentiment, or, rather, to the display of it.

The photograph presented a charming face, a little darker than common, thanks to the Indian sun, but exquisitely feminine; though full of gentleness and feeling, it had, however, a very noticeable expression of resolution, which Henny remarked upon at once.

'Oh, yes; Alma is not easily subjugated,' said Robert, smiling. 'When I got the bad news from home, the General was for breaking off the engagement. "I gave you my per-

mission," he said, "to pay your attentions to my daughter under certain circumstances, which no longer exist." But Alma said that she had given her promise without conditions. She had a very bad quarter of an hour with the old General ; but she got her way.'

'They generally do,' observed Irton, drily, 'and they go on getting it, let me tell you, after marriage.'

'Not in all cases,' said Henny, sorrowfully.

'If you think that sigh is on her own account, Aldred,' interposed Irton, 'you are very much mistaken.'

'I was thinking of poor Sophy, Fred.'

'To be sure,' said Irton, growing grave at once. 'That is a matter which, I think, Aldred, you should be informed about. I am acting, or trying to act, as the friend of the family with respect to certain circumstances, without any proper authorisation. They are such as I cannot communicate to the Canon without causing him the greatest distress of

mind, which you will agree with me he ought to be spared. I should not have shrunk from the responsibility if you had remained in India; but, as you are here, I must ask you to be our confidant and adviser.'

'I shall, I fear, be of very little use in the latter character,' said Robert, modestly; 'but if, by sharing the burden of what you have so kindly taken on your own shoulders, I can lighten it in any way, pray make use of me. I am come home to be of use.'

Then Irton narrated all that he had learnt respecting Sophy's two marriages.

Robert did not interrupt him, but now and again he could not repress an expression of amazement — 'Sophy secretly married!' 'Our little Sophy!' 'It is impossible!'

He was, perhaps, thinking less of Sophy than of the lengths to which an innocent and perfect creature like his Alma could possibly go in the way of deception, and hence his incredulity.

‘As to the fact of Sophy’s first marriage,’ returned Irton, ‘there is no room for doubt about it, though Jeannette has not as yet been able to put me in possession of Herbert Perry’s letter, or of the letter which accompanied it from Adair.’

‘Why should you want that?’ interrupted Aldred. ‘I can understand the value of Perry’s letter; but, surely, anything that Adair asserts, whether by word or in writing, must be valueless.’

‘Not necessarily; they may be admissions, or they may be corroborated by other evidence. However, I have made myself independent of all that. I have been to St. Anne’s Church, and found the entry of Sophy’s first marriage in the register.’ Here it seemed that the young lawyer had intended to stop. Indeed, he knew so little of Robert, and his capacity for keeping secrets, that for prudent reasons he had left out many things in his narration—what Stevie had witnessed

in the child's sick-room in Albany Street, for example ; but suddenly, as if from an uncontrollable impulse, he added, 'It was the drollest thing, that visit to the registry office.'

'Droll! How was that?'

'Well ; when I had found what I wanted, I produced a photograph of our friend Adair. The man is very peculiar-looking, I must tell you, keen and hatchet-faced, and blacker than you are—as black as the Devil—and asked the clerk whether he had ever seen the original of it. Yes, he said, he had ; and taken particular notice of him, because he had given him half a sovereign instead of his usual fee. The fellow is a mean hound enough by nature ; but I suppose his joy at finding that his information as to Sophy's secret marriage was correct, and that consequently she was in his power, was too much for him, and he had fallen into a fit of generosity. At all events, not only did the clerk recollect him, but he had made a note of the date of his

visit. Now, I saw Adair for the first time that very afternoon in London at some luncheon rooms, and when I met him at your father's table, three days afterwards, and recognised him, he denied that we had ever met before. He swore that he was in the country on the day in question ; and everybody but myself—here Irton cast a triumphant look at his wife—believed him.'

'And my dear Robert,' put in Henny, quietly, 'I do believe that that corroboration of his own astuteness has given Fred almost as great satisfaction as if he had got your father's money back.'

'But, perhaps, the fact was of importance,' observed Aldred ; 'I am sure your husband would not have been so gratified from mere self-complacency.'

'How you men do hang together,' smiled Henny.

'You are an uncommonly sensible young fellow, Robert,' exclaimed Frederic. 'Excuse

my calling you by your Christian name, but you seem like an old friend, and I am sure one who can be trusted. And, since you have proved yourself so intelligent, I'll tell you something which otherwise I should not have confided to you just at present.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

‘THE law of England, Aldred,’ observed Irton, puffing slowly at his pipe, ‘admirable as it is in all respects (as you are doubtless aware, though living at so great a distance), has its peculiarities. It permits a marriage to be valid if one of the parties concerned is married under a feigned name, and the other is not aware of it; but, for certain good and wise reasons, it does not permit it if both are conscious of that inaccuracy. You open your eyes, my friend (I do not resent it in the least, one of the great objects of the law is to open people’s eyes), but you now understand; perhaps, that, next to our being assured of

Sophy's first marriage, it was most important to know that Adair was aware of the fact before he became her husband.'

'I see the importance,' answered Robert, thoughtfully, 'but do not see the ground for satisfaction ; since if you could have proved he had not been aware of it, the marriage would be invalid, and Sophy could at once be extricated from his clutches.'

'True ; but at what a sacrifice. She would be a mother, and no wife.'

'But if the man is such a husband as you describe,' urged the young fellow, 'and such a villain as I know him to be, would not any position be preferable——'

'Not in Sophy's view,' interrupted Irton ; 'not in any woman's view. Ask my wife here.'

'It is the child,' said Henny, gently. 'She might bear it for herself, but there is the child.'

'She means that in the case you are sup-

posing,' explained Irton—'that is, if the marriage were annulled—the child would be rendered illegitimate.'

'I see,' said Robert, thoughtfully; 'but what I again fail to see is what we have to congratulate ourselves upon.'

'Why, because the fool was married by banns. It is curious what stupid mistakes even the cleverest knaves are always making. Why didn't he marry her at a registry office?'

'How *could* he, Fred?' put in Henny, remonstratingly. 'Do you suppose the Canon would have permitted such a thing?'

'Well, he ought to have made a fight for it. If he had been aware of his danger he would have done it; but his error was—and it is the most fatal of all errors, my dear Aldred—he did not consult a lawyer.'

'But what difference could it have made whether Adair was married by banns or not?'

'Well, the making a false entry before a

registrar is an offence that can be got over, but to make one after the publication by banns is a more serious affair. The law in that respect is a little peculiar.'

'Peculiar ! Idiotic, I call it,' exclaimed the young fellow. 'Dear me, what a queer profession !'

'How like his father!' murmured the lawyer. 'He could never get over that Settiky trust.'

'But if this scoundrel has committed a felony,' exclaimed Robert, vehemently, 'why not try him, and trounce him ?'

'Well, in the first place, it is not a felony ; and also there is just this difficulty. He has, without doubt, performed a criminal act, so far as connivance goes ; but, unfortunately, the chief offender, in the eye of the law, would be the "party" who signed herself "Sophy Gilbert, spinster."''

'Good heavens ! she must have been stark, staring mad !' ejaculated Robert.

‘Not a bit of it. Having entered upon a certain most unjustifiable, but by no means unnatural, course of conduct, she felt herself compelled to go through with it. One lie more or less, poor soul, seemed of no great consequence, and of no greater importance than another. That is one of the great disadvantages of habitual deception—one loses one’s sense of proportion. However, though matters really are as I have described, Adair knows nothing of it ; and, though we cannot actually bring him to book, it may be possible to frighten him. There is a story told (no doubt by an enemy of the Church) called the “Six Curates of Cornerton.” These divines were shady as to character, and by no means spotless as to conduct, but the Bishop had a difficulty in getting rid of them. At last he hit upon a device—he sent each of them an anonymous letter, with these words of warning : “All is discovered ; flee.” And the next day the diocese was clear of the whole

half-dozen. Now we have something more tangible to go upon than His Lordship had. We know of one offence that this gentleman has committed ; and I suspect that he has done infinitely worse things. A similar warning, should the necessity arise for it, may have the like effect. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico* ; he may take our hint at this ecclesiastical peccadillo as referring to some much more serious matter, and show us a clean pair of heels at once. It is not a strictly professional way of going to work, I admit,' added the lawyer, with a slight blush, ' but——'

' Oh ! who cares twopence about that ?' interrupted the young man, contemptuously.

' I thought you wouldn't,' said Irton, drily.

' I can't imagine any human being having scruples in dealing with such a wretch as John Adair,' said Henny.

' I *knew* you wouldn't,' said Fred, com-

posedly. 'Still, permit me to feel a pang of compunction. Nothing but the reflection that the Law is intended for the widow and the orphan—though in this case it is the wife and child—could reconcile me to such a course of action ; but it may be the only one open to us, and in that case, my dear Aldred, you may be very useful.'

'So that is the reason why you have made me your confidant, is it ?' said Robert, smiling.

'Well, it's best to be frank, my dear fellow,' returned the other, a little disconcerted, but this time without a blush. He was naturally chary of those proofs of embarrassment, having but a very few in his possession altogether ; and the plate, as it were, having been destroyed.

When the young man had departed, taking with him the high esteem of both host and hostess, Henny could not help remarking to her husband that he had not been so very

frank, after all ; inasmuch as he had never mentioned to Robert one word of those terrible suspicions of Adair as regarded his child.

‘I dared not do it,’ returned Irton. ‘Not that I have the least doubt, of course, of Robert’s honour, or his good intentions, but because I know nothing about his temperament. I can remember a time, when I was of this young man’s age, had I heard such news, nothing would have prevented me from going straight to this scoundrel’s house and telling him what I thought of him. I would have told him,’ exclaimed the lawyer, rising from his seat and pacing the room, ‘if anything happens to that sick and helpless child, you shall never come to your natural end—the gallows. I’ll take you by the throat and squeeze the life out of you, you villain, with my own hands ! A very injudicious observation, I admit,’ he continued, in apologetic tones ; ‘but of the fruit of wisdom and

prudence Man is not an early bearer. If I have taken stock of our young friend aright, he is naturally impulsive ; though he spoke so quietly of his father's wrongs, he put, I noticed, a great restraint upon himself. Moreover, they are his own wrongs, which a noble nature (such as he inherits from the Canon) regards more patiently. But if he knew about little Willie, if ever there was an excuse (which of course there never is, my dear) for taking the law into one's own hands, he would find it there ; I think he might break out, and I couldn't blame him ; no, I couldn't blame him.'

From under her drooping eyes Henny regarded her husband with intense admiration. She esteemed him higher for the passionate indignation that obviously consumed him, than for the prudence which subdued it and prevented him from giving it play.

'After what you have heard from Dr. Woodruffe,' she sighed, after a pause, 'there

can be no moral doubt of this man's real intentions, I suppose ?'

'Not a shadow. He is at heart a murderer, and nothing less. But there would be the greatest difficulty in proving it. Stevie's testimony—the evidence of a nervous boy, under circumstances, too, so exceptional—though conclusive to us, is not to be depended upon in the witness-box. Woodruffe was very reticent, as I told you ; and I don't blame him for it, since I dared not speak out to *him*. Hitherto matters have not been ripe.'

'But, in the meantime, are you sure, Fred, that there is no danger——'

'There is great danger,' he interrupted, quickly. 'The fear of it is never absent from my mind ; my responsibility is, I am well aware, tremendous. Still, until to-night I have not dared to stir.'

'But what have you heard fresh to-night, Fred ?'

‘The corroboration, as I believe, of our worst suspicions. That conversation overheard by Robert in the railway carriage is, in my opinion, of the last importance. If it is necessary for Adair to raise such a sum of money as those men spoke of, and at once, the end—*his* end I hope—should be very near. He must be upon the verge of some desperate step. I must find out if possible about this Dawson and the S.S. scheme; but when I have once got my threads together, look to yourself, Mr. John Adair, for as sure as there is law in England’ (which he uttered as though he were saying ‘Justice in Heaven’) ‘you will find yourself in Queer street.’

‘My dear Fred, you quite frighten me,’ exclaimed Henny. ‘All this is so terrible, and yet you almost seem to enjoy it.’

‘I do enjoy it,’ was the frank rejoinder. ‘I have read that the pursuit of wild animals is a passion engrafted in human nature; for my part—who have never bagged so much as

a rabbit—I have hitherto disbelieved it ; but now I feel its truth. I understand the excitement of that patient night-watch for the tyrant of the jungle, the rapture of the moment when, rifle in hand, one marks him crouching for his spring upon the tethered and helpless heifer, and the vengeful triumph that fills the hunter's soul when his bullet crashes to the tiger's brain.'

'But the heifer?' suggested Henny, anxiously.

'Yes ; there is a difference there,' answered her husband, sobered in an instant. 'This human tiger must fall without his victim.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

HOME AGAIN.

It was a subject of wonder to many of the Canon's acquaintance that on that sudden loss of fortune caused by 'injudicious speculation' he had not hidden his head in some out-of-the-way locality, instead of remaining in a place where he had been wont to be thought so highly of. The idea had, indeed, occurred to himself; though more upon his sister's account than his own. He thought it might be an addition to the sting of poverty for her to have to bear it among those who knew her in her prosperous days. A woman, he reflected, however sensible, is more dependent upon circumstances than one of the sterner

sex, has her little pride of place, and feels, to some extent, the loss of means as a loss of dignity. He laid the greater stress on this because he was conscious of his own personal leaning the other way. Cambridge was inexpressibly dear to him, and the thought that he must quit it had greatly aggravated his misfortune.

Oh, unexpected stroke (was his reflection), worse than
of Death,
Must I thus leave thee, Paradise? Thus leave
Thee, native soil? These happy haunts and shades,
Fit haunt of gods! where I had hoped to spend,
Quiet if sad, the respite of that day
That must be mortal.

The possession of his college rooms was, of course, a great attraction to him, but under the circumstances, as he could not but feel, a somewhat selfish pleasure. It is probable that Aunt Maria was not ignorant of her brother's feelings, for she combated his proposals for change with arguments that at once pleased and pacified him. Cambridge,

she averred, was dear to her also. Elsewhere, in their changed circumstances, she would be nobody; but here, at all events with old friends, she would still occupy her former position. A sentiment which, as involving a certain vulgar view of life quite foreign to her nature, might have awakened suspicions in a less simple and more unbiased mind than that of the Canon. As it was, he had accepted Aunt Maria's choice with thankfulness and without misgiving.

He had taken a house in Providence Terrace—which, he said, with his old smile, ought to show that, notwithstanding the evils Fate had dealt him, he had 'no bad feeling'—a little row of buildings on Parker's Piece, an airy space enough to look upon, but dangerous as a pleasure-ground by reason of the missiles (ranging from a football to the small shot used at rounders) always flying about. It was a very tiny dwelling; the door opened upon a passage so narrow that

the term seemed a misnomer, since no adults could pass one another in it ; when a visitor called, the maid had to back to admit him, unless (which, of course, was not to be thought of) she lay down and let him walk over her, like the stag on the precipice in Mr. Browning's poem. Though little furniture had been reserved from the sale at 'The Laurels,' it was more than sufficient for the new tenement, and was, of necessity, much too large for it. As compared with their present surroundings, the old bookcases and tables were too tall ; the Canon used cheerfully to call attention to them as indicating their flood-tide of prosperity, the old high-water mark ; and, indeed, a place where the tide is out is no bad metaphor for a household that has seen better days, except, alas ! that in the latter case it seldom comes in again. That the dining-room should be so diminutive was of small consequence, since the hospitality that had been exercised at 'The Laurels' was

no longer possible ; but that the room behind, which was the Canon's study and smoking-room, should be such a nutshell, was deplorable.

The accommodation for literature provided for the ordinary inhabitant of Providence Terrace was one shelf below stairs, supplemented by a bookslide in the drawing-room ; so that the Canon's numerous tomes had to be piled against the wall, while one especially lordly volume played the humiliating part of a footstool. Moreover, the Canon passed much more of his time at home than had been his wont ; chiefly from a disinclination to leave Aunt Maria, but partly, perhaps, from his greater distance from Trinity. He had been always averse to exercise, but now all exertion had become distasteful to him ; the springs of existence had grown weak. A new trouble too had of late assailed him in the illness of his friend Mavors. While spending a few days in Paris, the tutor had contracted

a fever from which, though he had rallied at the time, he seemed unable to recover. His spirits, once so equable, had fled, and given place to a melancholy which Dr. Newton (who knew his patient well) held to be one of his gravest symptoms. Since his friend had been ailing, the Canon had never failed to visit him once a day, and always returned depressed. Fate had given too obvious proofs of her malice of late to permit of his being sanguine. Moneyless, childless, he already saw himself friendless. For, though many held him dear whose affection he reciprocated, there is no friend like an old friend. When such a one is about to depart upon the Unknown Road, we are wont to feel that it is time for us, too, to be going—that we have been overstaying our welcome. Even Milton failed to be the solace that he had been to the Canon. He could not always dissociate those sublime poems from the man, who, through their means, had become con-

nected with himself. The trail of the serpent was over them all.

One morning the Canon was sitting, as usual, in his little study, a book on the swing desk before him, but not at the reading angle. He kept one always open, lest Aunt Maria should look in and suspect him of the very vice he was at that moment indulging in—*Reverie*. A great student of human nature has taught us how blessed a thing is *Memory*, even to the unfortunate; but it is no less true that ‘a sorrow’s crown of sorrows is remembering happier things.’ An old man deep in thought is always a pathetic spectacle, and, but too often, a discouraging one.

While the Canon thinks—and sighs—there is presently a sharp ring at the bell. Visitors are few in these days, and he neither expects nor desires any. The little maid, who is a survival of the old household at ‘*The Laurels*,’ is aware of that fact, and deals diplomatically with all comers..

'Miss Aldred is at home,' she answers ; which implies that the master of the house is *not*, without going so far as to affirm it. On the present occasion, however, this subterfuge is denied her, as Miss Aldred happens to be without doors. So to the strange young man who so confidently demands speech with her master she replies that he is 'particularly engaged.'

'Still, I think, if he knew who I was he would see me,' said the visitor, gravely. 'I am his son.'

'You're never that, sir!' cries the maid.

'I really am,' returned the young man, smiling at her undisguised amazement.

'Why, sir, he don't expect you no more than the Queen. He was a talking of you at dinner only last night—not that I listens to the gentlefolks' talk ; but, with potatoes in one hand and the sauceboat in the other, to stop one's ears is difficult. He's always talking about you, but not a word 'as he dropped about your coming home.'

‘Where is he?’ inquired the young man, in a hushed voice.

‘In his study; the second door on the right, sir.’

‘Is he pretty well? To see me so unexpectedly will not hurt him?’

‘Lor bless you, no sir, not it! It will do him a world of good.’

The little maid knows nothing of ‘shocks to the system,’ and cannot understand that the sight of so handsome a young gentleman can be deleterious to anybody.

‘Don’t announce me,’ he says, softly. ‘I will announce myself.’ And he knocks gently at the study door.

The Canon settles the swing desk before him, and begins to be absorbed in the open book. He has his back to the door, and takes it for granted that the new-comer is his sister.

‘You are come back very soon, my dear, are you not?’

‘I can scarcely say that,’ answers a voice which, though its tones are hushed and gentle, electrifies him. ‘I have been away for more than five years.’

‘Robert? My boy — my dear, dear boy!’

For some moments the poor Canon (for all his ‘culture’) can only reiterate those few words with their one variation, ‘My boy,’ and ‘My dear boy.’ He hugs him, he kisses him, the tears roll down his withered cheeks without check. Then, suddenly perceiving that his son is about to betray a similar weakness, he cries out, ‘Don’t mind me, Robert. I was getting an old man; but you will make me young again. There is something to live for now.’ Then, in an altered voice, he added, ‘Why is it you have come back? But I need not ask, alas! You have lost your Alma, thanks to me—and there was nothing to keep you in India. Can you ever forgive your father?’

‘My dear Dad,’ exclaimed Robert, using, in an outburst of Nature’s self, the old childish term, ‘What is there to forgive? I come here to comfort you. Alma sent me over herself; if I hadn’t come she would have thrown me over, which, I do assure you, she has not done. “Your father is in trouble,” she said, “therefore your place is by his side.” Was she not right? Are you not glad to have me?’

‘Glad? Was I ever so happy before? I, who thought it was impossible—Heaven forgive me for doubting of its goodness—that I should ever be happy again.’

For the moment all his misfortunes were forgotten. The ‘days in which he had seen evil’ had melted away. While looking at his stalwart son he seemed to derive from him some of his health and strength, and looked ten years younger.

‘And Aunt Maria?’ inquired the young man.

‘Wonderful,’ returned his father. ‘You know what a good soul she always was, but she has developed into an angel. Not a word of reproach—nay, of regret—has ever dropped from her lips. One cannot gauge the goodness of a good woman, Robert, it is beyond man’s plummet.’

The young man nodded adhesion.

‘Alma is just like that,’ he said, simply.

‘Did you see any one as you came through London?’ inquired the Canon presently, with averted face.

‘Do you mean Sophy? No. I saw Henny and her husband, however, and of course heard about her. Irton thought it better that I should not see her for the present.’

‘Poor girl, poor girl,’ sighed the Canon. ‘You must not think hardly of her, Robert; it is I, not she, who am to blame.’

‘For my part, father, I blame neither of you. How could you have imagined the

possibility of such villany? How could honest people be expected to construct such an ineffable scoundrel as this Adair out of their own consciousness? It is a very hard case for both of you, but I pity Sophy most.'

'That is what Mavors says. As for ourselves, the man has done his worst; but she is still in his power. Poor girl, poor girl! Now tell me, my dear boy, about your Alma, and those prospects which your unhappy father has darkened, if not destroyed.

Then Robert told him what he had already told the Irtons, but at greater length. He lingered over all that concerned his betrothed, as though to speak of her brought her nearer to him; and the Canon, usually so impatient of detail, took as tender an interest in it all as though he had been mother instead of father.

Yet one thing Robert did not tell him, but reserved for the ear of Aunt Maria. From his father's letter, written, perhaps,

with some incoherence, ere he had recovered from the first effects of the blow fate had dealt him, he had not been able exactly to gather to what extent his fortunes had been reduced ; whether, indeed, he might not find himself absolutely penniless ; and on receipt of it he had started for home, taking with him all his savings—amounting to five hundred pounds. Considering that the disbursement of this sum must needs mean a proportionate postponement of his happiness, already indefinitely delayed, it was a sacrifice such as is seldom offered on the paternal altar.

‘ He will be as pleased,’ said Aunt Maria, laying her hand upon the young man’s head (a gesture that had something of benediction in it, as well as approval), ‘ as though it had been five millions—and indeed more pleased. But he would never take one farthing of it. He already reproaches himself with having robbed you of your birthright ; and do you suppose——’

‘ There is no reason to suppose anything, dear Aunt Maria,’ interrupted the young man. ‘ I don’t want him to know. Things are not, I am thankful to say, so bad as I feared they might be ; but it is plain to me that there are many comforts wanting here to which both you and my father have been accustomed. These, at least, can be supplied, and you can take the credit—and you know you always prided yourself upon your domestic economy—of having saved the money for them out of the housekeeping.’

‘ That is all very well,’ said Aunt Maria, smiling ; ‘ but only consider how my credit would suffer when I did *not* provide luxuries, not to mention the suspicions of what I must have done with the surplus up to the time when I began to provide them. Moreover, Robert, I could not be a party to such a proceeding—feeling as I do in the matter exactly as my brother feels—upon any account. If there had been really any such need for help

as you had in your mind, it would have been forthcoming from at least one quarter ; I cannot be doing wrong in telling you that much, though it was proffered in the strictest confidence. Directly Mr. Mavors heard that your father had suffered some pecuniary loss he behaved in the noblest manner.'

'I always thought old Mavors was a trump,' observed Robert, approvingly. 'I can imagine him coming to the governor, and saying, "We have shared many things in our time, from apples upwards (for they were at school together, you know), and now you must share my fortune ;" and I can see the governor shaking his dear old head, because he could not trust himself to speak.'

'Just so, Robert ; and because Mr. Mavors knew he would shake his head, he never broached the matter to him at all, but came straight to me. It was the last day he was seen out of doors, poor man, for he has been ill, very ill, ever since ; and never did a man come on a nobler errand.'

“ Miss Aldred,” he said, “ you and I are old friends, but your brother and I have been so all our lives ; I know all about him, and (though that is reason good why I should love him) it follows that I know his weaknesses. He is a very proud man, not of his many excellences, but in that sort of foolish way in which sensitive people are proud. A way that robs friendship of its advantage, and friends of what should be their highest pleasure. He has lost his money, it seems, without perhaps quite knowing how, and I am very certain without knowing how much. Now, my dear madam, he has heaps of friends who will offer help, no doubt ; but, having become poor, he will be ten times prouder than ever, and will take nothing. You smile as though you would say, ‘ And I agree with him ; ’ perhaps you may be right in their case, but I am a man who has only one tie in the world, that of friendship ; and I may almost add that I am bound by that tie to almost a

single object. Now, you must so contrive it—and I am sure it can be done—that your brother shall think himself much better off than he really is, and I will be his banker without his knowing it.”

‘Of course, it couldn’t be thought of,’ continued Aunt Maria; ‘but it was curious that Mr. Mavors’ proposition was, in fact, precisely similar to that which you have just suggested to me yourself, Robert, and (here she smiled) exhibited the same duplicity of character.’

‘What is also curious,’ answered the young man, slyly, ‘is that each of these ruffians and rascals should have selected *you* as the confidant of their nefarious schemes. Seriously, however, old Mavors must be a right good fellow. It is so much more to his credit, too, to show such sympathy, since he has never moved out of his college shell; never knew, I suppose, a serious trouble, never been in love, nor even in debt.’

‘Perhaps,’ sighed Aunt Maria, softly;

‘still, should he die, the world, to which he seems so little to belong, will be the loser.’

‘Is Mr. Mavors, then, very ill?’

‘I fear so. Dr. Newton thinks, I am convinced, worse of him than he tells the Canon. I wish Mr. Mavors would let us do something for him ; but he is so peculiar that it is difficult.

‘Do you think he would see me?’

‘Most certainly. I am sure he would like to do so. Why not go down to college this afternoon, instead of your father, since he will not be able to see both, and bring us word of him?’

To this Robert willingly agreed : it was a small thing enough—this visit to inquire after his father’s friend—but in the end, like many another small thing, it had important results.

CHAPTER XLV.

ILL IN COLLEGE.

WHEN Aunt Maria said that Mr. Mavors was 'peculiar' she was speaking from a good woman's standpoint. To her it seemed quite contrary to nature that any human creature being ill should be attended by hirelings, when loving service was within his reach. It was as natural to her to tend the bed of sickness as for the average man to flee from it; if a servant fell ill in her house she exchanged positions with her at once, and became *her* servant. The man who wrote

When pain and anguish wring the brow
A ministering angel thou,

used no hyperbole. When disease has smitten

their dear one, and death is hovering over him, there is something more than angelic about women, something that is Divine. That 'sentiment' which men attribute to them so scornfully, at such times disappears; the tenderness that lies at the root of it remains without a trace of weakness. They are actuated by love unspeakable, which is nevertheless in complete subjection to duty. I once saw a mother mixing some sort of nourishment for her dying child. There was not the shadow of hope for his life, he had been 'given over,' it was 'a question of hours,' and she knew it. But if her soul's salvation had depended on it (which it did not, for it was already assured) she could not have given more attention to the concoction of that useless meal. She worked at it dry eyed; she had never indeed shed a tear, since it was bad for the darling to see his mother 'giving way;' but those eyes, 'homes of silent prayer' indeed, and of unanswered

prayer, I shall never forget them as they looked in the performance of that last loving duty.

Miss Aldred had all the instincts of her sex for smoothing the couch of sickness, and her services would have been freely offered to Mr. Mavors, had there been the slightest hope of their acceptance. But, as Dr. Newton said, the very idea of such a thing would have frightened the Tutor into a fit. The doctor, his gyp, and Mrs. Murdoch (who had been transferred to him as having a better gift of nursing than his own bedmaker) were surely sufficient, he would have argued, to look after any one man, and the suggestion that he should accept the ministrations of the Canon's sister, if it had not thrown him into a fever, would certainly have produced febrile symptoms or rose-rash.

An old bachelor and scholar, but who had not even been familiar with female authors (for the women of Greece and Rome did not rush into MS. as ours do into print), he

shrank from the notion of being attended by any one of the softer sex. To Mrs. Murdoch, indeed, he had no objection, perhaps because he did not consider her to come under that category, in which he was quite mistaken. It was she who received Robert Aldred at the Tutor's door, and no sooner heard the young man's name than she began to wipe her mouth on her apron.

'Why, Master Robert! I've known you ever since you were so high. Don't you remember your father's poor old bedmaker?'

To have ignored such a relationship would have been a brutality. He compromised matters, and held out his hand.

'Dear, how pleased the Canon and your aunt must have been to see you,' she exclaimed, 'all the way from the Ingies!'

She regarded him admiringly, and also thankfully, as if he had been something rich and rare imported for her special benefit and delectation.

'And Mr. Mavors? How is he to-day?'

The good lady's smile disappeared at once.

'Poorly, sir, very poorly; leastways that's my opinion. When one has been ordered "a generous diet"—for those were the doctor's own words—and sticks by choice to tea and slops, it's contrary to nature, and a bad sign.'

'But he's no worse than he was, I hope.'

'Perhaps not, sir; but he's no better. The clock's a-going, but there's nothing to keep it so; the key as ought to wind it up is mislaid somewhere. I saw it with my own old Jacob, and I see it with Mr. Mavors; only he don't like being talked to, as Jacob did. He holds up his finger, and thinks, and thinks; and he don't speak hisself much, except in dreams. He's asleep now, but it's near his usual time for waking, if you'd like to stop.'

'I will certainly stop, if it will do no harm.'

'Harm? Lord love you, no, sir; any

one as belongs to the Canon will be as welcome to him as flowers in May. Them flowers yonder, by-the-by, was sent by your Aunt Maria yesterday. The sight on 'em brought the tears into his eyes, which shows how very, very weak he must be, poor man!'

The sitting-room was a large and handsome one, looking upon Neville's Court. The door, which communicated with the much smaller bedroom, stood wide open. Robert took a chair in front of it, and a book to while away the time. Mrs. Murdoch sat over the fire at some distance off, and, instead of fatiguing her mind with literature, refreshed it with a little nap. All was quiet, save for the coo of a pigeon on the stone balustrade outside the window, and the footfall of some solitary undergraduate in the cloisters beneath. The book Robert had taken up was Plutarch's 'Lives,' a work of the highest reputation ; but, notwithstanding its attractions, he had fallen

into a reverie, from which he was suddenly aroused by the words 'Sophy, Sophy!' At first he thought he must be mistaken, and that the sound was a part of his own day-dream, with which, in fact, the name had been connected ; but, on looking up, his eyes fell upon the sick man, now broad awake and staring at him from the bed with stern suspicion.

'Is your name Adair?' whispered the Tutor, hoarsely.

'No, sir,' said Robert, 'rising softly and approaching the bed. 'My name is Aldred. I am the son of your old friend the Canon.'

'Why are you so black, then, like the other?'

'It is the Indian sun,' said Robert, smiling. 'I was white enough when I wished you good-by, five years ago.'

'True ; I remember now,' said the Tutor. 'Pray forgive a sick man's fancies. Your father did not say he was expecting you.'

‘No ; I came home without giving him notice.’

‘Because he was in trouble?’

‘Why, yes. It struck me that I might be, if not of service, at least of some comfort to him.’

‘Just so ; a good son,’ murmured the Tutor, looking at the young man wistfully. ‘Sons and daughters—“Blessed is the man that has his quiver full of them.” That is not a disputed passage.’

This was said in monologue, and by no means in the Tutor’s usual voice—which, indeed, in health was distinct and somewhat strident. Robert thought to himself that, had he met his father’s friend under chance circumstances, he would no more have recognised him than Mr. Mavors had recognised himself (Robert). It was not only that the Tutor had grown grey, nor even that his face showed the ravages of sickness ; he looked a broken man.

‘Alma mater, Alma mater !’ he continued,

softly. 'Yes, yes! I owe her everything, and she shall be repaid; yet, oh! yet'—here his voice dropped to a whisper. 'Where's the nurse, Robert?'

'The poor old soul has fallen asleep, sir. She knew I was here.'

'Quite right; think of the poor and the old, and shield them. That will comfort you some day, when you come to lie as I am. No, not as I am. There will be children about your bed, a wife to smooth your pillow; loving faces, tender hands; better so—better so.'

The sick man's voice was firm, though very low; but while he spoke there came into his face something that caused the young man to avert his own: tears, large tears, were rolling silently down the Tutor's cheeks. There were furrows there, but they had never been so used before. With some of us they are river-beds; in the present case it was only that water had found a road that way.

There was a long silence, and then the same name was softly breathed that had already fallen on the other's ear.

‘Sophy, Sophy ; have you seen her?’

‘No, sir ; I passed too rapidly through town ; but I saw the Irtons, who told me a great deal about her. Not good news, I am sorry to say.’

‘Unhappy?’

‘Very ; at least I fear so.’

‘Poor girl, poor girl!’

‘It is not only—as you are doubtless aware, sir—that she has a bad husband ; but, unfortunately, she has some little knowledge of the full extent of his baseness, which until lately has been kept from her.’

‘How was that?’

Then Robert, who thought the question referred to the means whereby Sophy had learnt what her husband had done to the Canon, described them to his companion as Henny had narrated them to himself.

The Tutor listened with closed eyes ; but it was plain, by the movement of his brow and lips, how the narration affected him.

‘Then the poor girl knows at last,’ he murmured, when it was finished. ‘What anguish, what remorse she must be enduring!’

‘Indeed, sir, I fear so. It has just struck me, however, that I have been very indiscreet in speaking of all this to you. I have been distressing you—since Sophy is an old friend of yours—by telling you the very thing which I have been enjoined to keep from my father, namely, that Sophy is aware of having been made the instrument of his ruin. His object throughout has been to spare her that knowledge.’

‘That is so like him!’ exclaimed the Tutor, with a flush on his worn cheek :

A man who bears without abuse
The grand old name of gentleman ;
Defiled by every charlatan,
And soiled with an ignoble use.

‘Young man, you are a gentleman’s son.’

‘I know it, sir,’ answered Robert, simply. ‘If I cannot imitate him, I hope I shall never disgrace him.’

‘No, no, you will not do that. He will live again in his boy.’

Presently, after another pause : ‘You spoke of ruin, Robert. The exact sum which the Canon had to pay twice over—one forgets these things in sickness.’

‘It was fifteen thousand pounds.’

‘Just so. And never to have told her. A true gentleman. *Bene natus, bene vestitus*—no, that’s not it——’

‘I don’t think you must talk to Mr. Mavors any more, sir, just now,’ interposed Mrs. Murdoch, awakened from her nap, and perceiving a necessity for silence.

A smile crept over the sick man’s face, as the mellow twilight falls upon a ruin.

‘Quite right, quite right, Nurse ;’ then putting out his wasted hand to Robert, ‘Give my love to my old friend.’

‘And you will be sure not to tell him what I have told you, sir,’ whispered the young man, as he leant over him.

‘You may trust me, my lad. I am going where secrets are well kept.’

It was not those mournful words only which impressed Robert Aldred with a sense of the gravity of the Tutor's illness. His whole interview had tended in that direction ; and he told Aunt Maria as much without circumlocution.

‘If it is really so, Robert, it will be a sad blow to your father,’ she answered, gravely ; ‘but I can hardly think it is so. Mr. Mavors seems to take such interest in matters—that is, in college matters.’

‘And not only in those,’ put in Robert ; ‘I had no idea he was such a friend of Sophy's.’

‘He spoke of her, did he?’ said Aunt Maria, with interest.

‘Yes, indeed ; he seemed wonderfully

wrapped up in her. He thought it such an excellent plan—and so like my father to think of it—that the knowledge of her husband's baseness should have been kept from her.'

'But you did not tell him of what her husband had done?'

'Tell him? No. I spoke of it as a matter of course. You don't mean to say that he was not aware of it?'

'Indeed he wasn't. No one is aware of it except the Irtons. I am afraid you have done mischief.'

'But how was I to know? I thought in the case of an old friend like Mr. Mavors——'

'Just so. It was not your fault, dear boy. But the thing was kept from everybody, and especially, for a certain reason, from Mr. Mavors. Did he not seem surprised and distressed?'

'He was distressed, undoubtedly, but that seemed only natural. His surprise, as I now

understand, he purposely concealed from me. I am afraid I told him everything.'

'Poor man, poor man! and he loved her so.'

'Loved whom? Not Sophy?'

'Yes, he proposed to her, and she refused him. What fools girls are!' exclaimed Aunt Maria. The idea of her rejecting Mr. Mavors for John Adair; Hyperion for a Satyr!'

'Don't abuse his personal appearance, my dear Aunt, because I have just been taken for him. Mr. Mavors said I was "black, like him."'

'Yes, Robert; but your blackness is but skin deep. That man is black to his heart's core. Poor Sophy was always—well—susceptible. There was another young man, but that is no matter now. He had, at all events, good looks to recommend him. But this fellow——'

'The one that is like me,' murmured Robert, plaintively.

‘I cannot conceive,’ continued Aunt Maria, taking no notice of this interpolation, ‘what she could have seen in him. Why on earth did she marry John Adair?’

Robert shook his head. He could have enlightened Aunt Maria upon that point, but he very wisely held his tongue. A burnt child dreads the fire, and he had had enough of telling family secrets.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SOPHY'S LETTER.

THE effect of his son's presence on the Canon was something marvellous. His brightness and his tenderness worked upon him for good, as the sunshine and the rains revive the drooping flower. A sort of Indian summer seemed to have set in with him ; and but for his old friend's illness I think he would have been as happy as he had ever been, though not quite in the old fashion.

‘ You may tell your Alma, Robert,’ said Aunt Maria, ‘ that her dutiful advice to you has saved your father's life.’ She knew that way of putting it would please him better than if she had praised his own unselfishness

in coming to England. 'If you were not here he could hardly stand these distressing visits to dear Mr. Mavors.'

And, indeed, the spectacle of his old friend and contemporary gradually losing his hold upon life gave him unspeakable pain. There was nothing, of course, terrible in such a man's decease; no haunting fears or distrust of the All-wise and All-merciful. Indeed, it would have been curious to those unacquainted with the turn of thought prevailing among men of their stamp at Cambridge, that between these two men—being both clergymen—the subjects so commonly dwelt upon under such circumstances were rarely alluded to. They spoke of old times with which they were conversant, rather than of the Unknowable; of their lifelong (though undemonstrative) friendship, rather than of their reunion hereafter; of their common friends, alive or dead. Once, however, a something of bitterness in some remark made by the dying

man suggested the inquiry from his companion, 'You are at peace, I trust, Mavors, with all men?'

'With all that are worthy of the name of man,' was the stern and unexpected reply. Then, as if regretting his harshness, the Tutor added, with a smile, 'There is not much malice and hatred in my heart, Aldred, I do assure you—nothing, I trust, to be repented of in that way; a little envy of yourself, my friend, that's all.'

'How so?'

'Because you have great possessions—a son, a wife.'

'Nay, my poor wife is dead,' said the Canon, soothingly, as one speaks to a sick man whose mind has gone astray a little.

'Yes; but you have the memory of her. Believe me, my friend, it is well to have such memories to dwell upon.'

That was the only hint the Tutor gave of having suffered loss or disappointment; to

the Canon he never spoke of Sophy. It was strange that he should have shown less of reticence to Robert ; but perhaps his youth and the circumstance of his being engaged to Alma (of which he was cognisant) had encouraged the confidence. It is true that custom is strong even in death, but, also, thoughts that have been stored up, as in a locked casket, by men in health, will often in their last hours find utterance, and that to ears which least expect them.

There was nothing in the Tutor's manner to suggest to his old friend any immediate danger ; on the contrary, there was a certain contentment in his speech and manner that bespoke even more than usual the absence of any pressing anxiety or apprehension ; nor was there any procrastination in his parting, such as there is wont to be when we feel that it may be for the last time. How terrible is the sense of it to the about-to-be-survivor ! How he regrets the hours, the days, the

years, wherein he has voluntarily separated himself from that dying dear one, and which in the aggregate, perhaps, would have represented another existence passed in his company—a twin life.

The Canon had no foreboding that he had beheld his friend for the last time when he walked home one afternoon with thoughtful steps that grew unconsciously more free and buoyant as he neared the little home which held his new-found treasure.

On his study table, however, was a letter, the contents of which, for a moment, put even Robert out of his mind. It was in his ward's handwriting, which in itself argued nothing strange (for she had never ceased to correspond with him in a suppressed mechanical fashion); it had not, as usual, been sent on to him from 'The Laurels,' but was directed to his present address. It must have come to Sophy's knowledge, therefore, that he had removed to Providence Terrace. Though this

was a piece of information that might have oozed out any day, he opened the envelope with no little apprehension that she might have gleaned still further knowledge, and the first sentence convinced him that it was so.

‘ Kindest and best of friends, whom I have robbed and grieved—dear Guardian, whose care and love I have repaid by falsehood and ingratitude—pity if you cannot pardon me. If I came to you in person (which I dare not do, for the sight of your dear face would kill me ; and my life, otherwise worthless, is necessary to my child)—I say, if I came into your presence and grovelled at your feet with tears and prayers, I could not, believe me, feel a greater abasement than I do as I sit here and write these shameful words.

‘ Until recently, though fully conscious of my base behaviour to you in other respects, I was not aware of the ruin I had brought upon you. I thought that I had only lies and deceit to reproach myself with—transgressions

that have brought their own punishment upon me, and concerning which I thought, therefore, that I had some sort of right—as if such a wretch as I had rights at all!—to be silent. But now I know what an irremediable injury I have done to you and yours, it seems to me that no suffering in this world can be inflicted on me commensurate with my offences. That I was but an unconscious instrument in the hands of another is no excuse for me, for, but for my own misdoings, I should never have fallen into his hand. The history of them you will find enclosed (there was a paper in the envelope containing a short narrative of her first marriage, and the causes which had, as she thought, compelled her to make the second), and when you have read it, after the first sharp pang of anger and regret is over, one source of sorrow will be dry for ever. This is one of the reasons why I have written to you, notwithstanding that it has been enjoined upon me not to do so. As you, in

your great kindness and consideration for my feelings, would have hidden from me the real cause of your ruin, so it was judged by those who knew of my ill behaviour under your roof, that it was best to spare you that knowledge ; but my hope is that, though you may still pity me (as we pity the worst of criminals), it will be henceforth impossible for you to feel pain upon my account.

‘I cannot ask you to forget me, because every hour must bring to you some bitter reminder of the wrong I have done you, but think of me as dead, as having died years ago, when your Robert was my playfellow. Alas ! what evil may I not have done to him also—sundered him, perhaps, from his promised bride, destroyed his prospects ! It is terrible to think that not only here at home am I justly condemned and despised, but that across the ocean, thousands of miles away, my name must needs be held in abhorrence. Oh, if I could be once again as I was when Robert left

you! There is nothing, alas! the same with me now; even my love for you, though it will cease but with my latest breath, is something different: I feel unworthy to entertain it. It seems blasphemy to take your name within my lips even in my prayers.

‘You will wonder, perhaps, when you have read the record of my life, that such a one as I should dare to pray. But then, dear Guardian, there is little Willie; when I sit by her bedside with her thin small hand in mine, I still seem to have some link with Heaven. It is scarcely credible, considering her tender years, but there is nothing her mother can teach her which my little darling cannot understand. I say it is scarcely credible, but she has been made aware that she has been made the pretext for her godfather’s ruin. She clings to her fragile life, and believes that she will live to put things right.’ She has questioned me a hundred times, and “when I come of age,” she says (which she will never

live to do, and if she did, it would be too late), "I will pay all their money back to godpapa and Aunt Maria." When Dr. Newton came to see her, her chief anxiety was to learn whether she would live to be twenty-one. I suppose the good Doctor thought the dear child's mind was wandering, but it was as bright and clear as it is pure. We have no secrets from one another, Willie and I. I have told you one of the reasons for my writing to you, but the chief is after all a selfish one—to bespeak, should anything happen to me, your sympathies for my innocent child. I know you will never visit upon her, even in your thoughts, the sins of her parent, but I beseech you to try to love her for her own sake; she is as worthy of your love as her mother has proved herself unworthy. What higher eulogium, alas! can I pass upon her? Henny will take care of her, I know, if permitted to do so. But the law—there is no one, alas! who has better cause

to know it than yourself—is hard and cruel. Dear Guardian, I would rather see Willie dead at my feet than trust her to the hands in which the law would place her. I will say no more upon this matter, for “that way madness lies,” only if anything should happen which should sink me still lower in your disesteem, do not judge me too hastily ; I am in such straits as you cannot guess.

‘ You will show to Aunt Maria what I have written ; I do not ask you to plead with her for me, I trust to that tender heart of hers, whose trust I have so shamefully abused, for charity and pardon.

‘ YOUR LOVING AND PENITENT WARD.’

At first even the contents of this letter, significant as they were of much, had less effect upon its recipient than the enclosure (with its confession of Sophy’s previous marriage) which accompanied it, and from which he received a shock that for the moment utterly overwhelmed him. The operation of

moral couching—the opening one's eyes to what human nature is really capable of—is, after the age of fifty, a very trying one. To find oneself so mature, and yet so ignorant, is painful to one's *amour propre*. But after all we may have travelled much, and yet not be well acquainted with our own country, and the Canon, who knew “men and cities,” might well have been excused for not understanding the character of a young girl, or the ways of her lovers. Those who plume themselves most on their knowledge of the world often know least of those about them, and while they have the keenest appreciation of the farce next door, are unaware of the more serious drama that is being performed under their own roof.

In the Canon's case, the having been ‘made a fool of’ was a small thing, however, as compared with other matters ; nor did it even enter his thoughts that Aunt Maria must have played the part of watch-dog very carelessly.

He set down her emotion at this strange sad news wholly to sorrow, whereas she was bowed to the earth by self-reproach. But for her laxity of discipline, as she bitterly reflected, Sophy could hardly have had the opportunities of going so far astray. Many an incident, to which she had at the time paid little attention, now occurred to her, which she felt would have excited her suspicions had she been less careless, or less credulous.

It was a fortunate thing—since in such cases of catastrophe each recipient of the intelligence adds fuel to flame—that this revelation told nothing new to Robert. He was able to put the story of the past aside, and give his mind to the present. Sophy's letter filled him with vague but serious apprehensions, not so much from what it revealed, but from its reticence. It seemed to him, having, perhaps, his Alma in his mind, and the supposition of what she would have done under similar circumstances, that the writer's total

silence respecting her husband was something portentous. She had only once alluded to him, and that in the most distant way, where she had spoken of her having been 'an unconscious instrument in the hands of another;' and thus ignoring, as it were, of his very existence had something eerie about it, which augured worse than even the speaking of him as he deserved would have done. That concluding sentence, 'if anything should happen to sink me lower (if possible) in your disesteem, do not judge me too harshly: I am in such straits as you cannot guess,' was also terribly significant, and seemed to him to hint at some desperate contingency.

All three were aware that Sophy's relations with her husband were unsatisfactory, and even more ; but Robert only guessed as much from the tone in which Irton had spoken of them (for it will be remembered that the lawyer did not fully confide in him), while both the Canon and Aunt Maria were

disposed to minimise what might be amiss between the young couple. Not, of course, that by this time they were in any doubt as to the real character of Mr. John Adair, or that they underrated the hardship of Sophy's lot ; but they regarded marriage not only as a bond, but as an indissoluble bond. In their eyes, marriage was not made for man so much as man—and especially woman—was made for marriage. Whatever inconveniences—nay, whatever wrongs and wretchednesses—might result from that solemn engagement, they were to be endured and made the best of. Under these circumstances, it was quite sufficient for them, in the way of apprehension, to imagine that Sophy's vague reference to some change in her present circumstances might relate to an intention on her part to separate from her husband. Her allusion to the cruelty of the law, which would in such a case give him over the custody of the child, seemed to them to corroborate this idea. But to Robert's

ears Sophy's words had another and much more serious meaning. He gathered from her despairing tone, and especially from her appeal to the Canon on behalf of her child, as of something extraneous to herself, that she was contemplating suicide.

There was no need for him to dismiss from his heart any thought of disappointment, or delay of happiness, of which she had been the unwilling cause; he had long ago forgiven and forgotten all that; but no sooner did this awful apprehension dawn upon him than the recollection of earlier days, when Sophy and he had been half lovers, half playfellows, also awoke within him. A profound pity for her unhappy lot, a vehement abhorrence of the man who had turned the sweetness of that young life to gall, took possession of his soul. Nothing, however, was further from his nature than any indulgence in heroics; his reflections found a very practical vent. He sauntered out that evening

and bought a 'Bradshaw,' and, having selected the same train by which his father had travelled some few months ago on a scarcely less painful errand, started for London before the household were astir the next morning, leaving a few commonplace lines behind him, to say that, 'without wishing to make a fuss about it, it had struck him to see with his own eyes how things were going on in Albany Street.'

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE LAST INTERVIEW.

IN the records of old prison life there is a ghastly story of two lifelong enemies, who, having been sentenced for their crimes to the same punishment, find themselves chained together and fated to pass the remainder of their existence in each other's company. It ends comparatively happily, or, at all events, better than might have been expected, for the stronger in a fit of uncontrollable passion murders the weaker, and is promptly hanged for it. In married life, the fetters which unite the miserable pair who abhor one another are not so easily loosed. On the other hand, the bond is not quite so close. If they are poor,

indeed, it is terribly near : to have to share the same bed and board with one we fear or despise must be a torture beyond the imagination of an inquisitor ; this is the chief reason, no doubt, why murders occur in domestic life among the lower orders so much oftener than among the well-to-do. In the latter case there is room for man and wife to live, and breathe, and have their being, apart from one another ; they are married only in name, and co-existence is made endurable. I am speaking of course of sensitive persons. The majority of mankind, fortunately, are not 'dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorns,' or indeed with any very delicate feelings ; to a great many men one wife is as good as another (though perhaps not so good as two), and to a great many women one husband is as good as another, just as one acquaintance is as good, to most people, as another. 'We are not perfect ourselves, and must not expect perfection in others,' was a remark once made

to me by a good woman, with reference to one who for his treatment of her deserved the gallows.

Sophy Adair was not a wife of that kind. Little as she saw of her husband, she would have gone mad had it not been for the pre-occupation of her mind with her sick child. That was the tie that bound her to existence ; everything else prompted her to escape from it.

For weeks, of late, Adair had been scarcely ever at home. He breakfasted early by himself, and left the house only to return to it after its inmates had retired to rest. Sometimes he sent a telegram from his office, ' Shall bring a friend this evening who will dine alone with me.' Upon the first occasion Sophy had understood this to mean that, though her husband did not wish to see her at table, he meant her to welcome their guest in the drawing-room. An unpleasant task enough, yet one which, however, she did not

shrink from ; not from any notion of pleasing her husband (for such an illusion had long vanished), nor from any sense of duty, nor even from fear of him, but from a mere mechanical impulse on which she now always acted, except in matters which concerned her child.

The guest arrived, a tall, stout, florid personage, covered with jewellery, and smoking an immense cigar. He was a few paces in advance of his host. 'Hullo! petticoats!' he exclaimed, not, 'in hushed amaze,' by any means, but with naïve and very undisguised astonishment.

Adair's thin face, behind him, grew pale with fury.

'That is my wife, Mr. Dawson. I suppose my telegram miscarried,' addressing himself with cold precision to Sophy.

'Glad it did. Wanted to keep you dark, I reckon, from yours truly,' observed the new comer. 'Your husband is one of them as is

all for business, ma'am. For my part, I like it mixed.'

The manner of the man was odious, yet not so bad as his expression. The one suggested coarse vulgarity, the other villainy.

To do Adair justice, he had not intended to introduce this man to his wife's society ; but that he should have invited such a person to his own house was significant indeed of the social depths to which he had sunk. It could not have been boon companionship that had caused him to do so, for he had no taste for it ; it must have been downright necessity. The very parlour-maid was cognisant that there was 'something queer' in her having to wait on such a guest.

Mr. Dawson's conversational powers (often in inverse ratio to the personal attractions of their possessor) seemed to recommend him to his host, for he came again and again. On the other hand, things did not always go smoothly with them. Mr. Dawson's voice

was sometimes pitched in a higher key than is used for anecdote, and he was more than once heard to thump the table with an emphasis too great for mere appreciation. There were certainly disagreements, possibly quarrels. On one occasion a very strange circumstance came under the notice of the parlour-maid. Her master had brought a new friend home, with whom he dined alone, as usual—a much older and less talkative gentleman, but in whose voice and manner there was something, nevertheless, familiar to her. His behaviour, too, was familiar, for he chucked her under the chin at parting, exactly as it had been Mr. Dawson's wont to do; and in the performance of this ceremony—which, according to her own account, she strenuously resisted—his long white beard came off and revealed Mr. Dawson himself. A wig is a common ornament enough, but a false beard hung on by the ears is an unusual addition to the human countenance, and excites comment.

It was concluded, even by those of his own household, that Mr. John Adair was getting into bad company.

One morning, instead of leaving home, as usual, directly he had swallowed his early meal, Adair sent for Sophy to the breakfast-room. She had not seen him for some days, and even to her eyes (in which there was no wifely interest) the change in him was very remarkable. His face was thinner and more haggard than she had ever seen it ; it looked pale and anxious, but with a certain determined ferocity about it, like that of some hunted wolf that listens for the cry of the hounds. He had a telegram in his hand which he had just received, and which he was turning and twisting nervously. He glanced up at her white steadfast face as she entered the room, and then walked to the window, keeping his back to her.

‘How is the child?’ he said, in hoarse, quick tones.

‘Better ; I trust certainly better, though she gains strength very slowly.’

‘That’s well,’ he said, with an unmistakable sigh of relief ; ‘we must leave home to-day.’

‘Leave home ! You have surely not the doctor’s sanction for that.’

‘I have,’ he answered positively ; ‘and if I had not, still we must leave home. Please to give me your best attention, madam, instead of asking questions or making objections. Something has gone wrong in the City ; it is useless to attempt to explain it—women know nothing of such things—but it has become necessary for me to go abroad until the thing has blown over. You need not fear for the child, for she will travel with the utmost comfort. Here is some money.’ He thrust his hand into his breast pocket, and pulling out a great sheaf of bank-notes threw one of them towards her without looking at it. ‘You may take an invalid carriage for her, if you please, but you will go by the two o’clock

train to Gravesend, and wait at the Green Dragon Hotel for my arrival. Jeannette will, of course, accompany you. Do you understand?’

She did not reply, and he wheeled round and confronted her impatiently. His brow was knit, his features were working convulsively ; he looked anxious, yet furious, like a gambler who is watching his last stake.

John Adair had never been good-looking ; but it was curious how every trace of youth and culture had by this time gone out of him, leaving only the desperado.

Nor was Sophy, in her turn, less changed. She was still very comely, but her comeliness was the last thing about her that would have struck any observer above the level of the clown. Her characteristic had been wont to be her vivacity ; her sprightliness of air and manner had been so marked as to be a something peculiar to herself ; all this was gone. The delicate colour on her cheek, the laughter in her eyes, even the agile movement of her fairy limbs, had vanished. Although the mere

ghost of her former self in these respects, there was, however, a determination in Sophy's face as it met that of her husband which it had never possessed in youth, and which the other shrank from. Ever since she had known that Adair had made use of her to rob the Canon, her loathing of him had cast out her fear of him. He had perceived the change, but mistaken the cause of it. He thought that she must long ago have become acquainted with his behaviour to her guardian. He had wiped that crime from his own mind with the ease with which the commercial philosopher wipes out a bad debt; he had committed so many offences since—offences, too, that had so much more danger in them—that the remembrance of it had ceased to trouble him. He attributed Sophy's new-found courage to quite another cause. His conscience led him to suppose that, somehow or other, she had become acquainted with his designs against little Willie, or, at all events, that she had some suspicion of them. Face to face with her, he

was almost afraid of her—afraid that she should suddenly cry aloud, ‘Villain! you have been plotting murder against your own child, and I have found you out.’ Nothing, indeed, but an extreme and urgent need could have induced him to talk to her upon the subject of little Willie at all. But, as it was essential that they should leave the house, and the state of the child’s health, as he had foreseen, was her chief objection to that step, it was necessary to speak upon the topic. His furious manner—though he was angry enough—was half-simulated ; he put it on to intimidate her, or, perhaps, to hide the trepidation with which he was himself agitated. He was no coward, but he had tried and failed to kill something else besides little Willie—his conscience.

‘Do you understand me, madam?’ he repeated.

‘Yes,’ she answered, firmly ; ‘I understand you very well.’

There was no satire in her tone ; but the

simple truth she spoke was a far worse sting than any satire.

‘Then you know that I will be obeyed. You and Jeannette can pack up all that is necessary in a couple of hours, I suppose. In order that there shall be no excuse, however, you shall have four.’

‘It shall be as you please.’

This submission was too prompt, too easy, and it excited his suspicions ; his mind was like a sentinel who has outstayed his watch and lost his nerve. Every sound suggested an alarm, and even the absence of sound. He thought that she was only promising to obey him to gain time.

‘Mind you,’ he said, in a menacing voice, ‘I shall be here myself to see that all is ready. In the meantime I will order the invalid carriage for the two o’clock train. Though I shall not accompany you, I shall be sure to be at the Green Dragon. You may not see me, perhaps, to-night, for I shall arrive late—by water. You need say nothing of that to

anybody ; but I wish to repose confidence in you.'

Across Sophy's face flitted the distorted shadow of a smile. He noticed it, and frowned heavily.

'We are man and wife,' he said, 'and must sink or swim together. Things have gone badly here, but they will go better elsewhere. We must roost elsewhere, but our nest will be feathered for us,' and he tapped his breast pocket exultingly. 'Where we are going the child will recover more quickly. It is the very climate which the doctor recommends.'

If he expected her to ask where this salubrious spot was situated, he was mistaken.

Her manner was anything but indifferent. It was plain that she was paying attention to every word he said ; but her face was cold and stiff as a stone.

'Have you any further commands ?' she inquired. Patient Griselda could have said no more, but her tone jarred on his ear.

‘You speak like an automaton,’ he answered, angrily. ‘No, I have nothing more to say ; it will be the easier to remember. At one o’clock I will be here with a large carriage, so that the child can lie at length. You will be sure to be ready by that time.’

‘I shall be ready.’

He went out without another word.

If he could have looked into the future—if he could have known what that very day was to bring forth—would he have parted from her thus ? It is difficult to say. But if Sophy could have foreseen what was to happen, I do not think her behaviour would have been different. Things had gone too far with her in the way of misery, of which this man was the chief cause, for any retrograde step towards tenderness or even pity for him. The tremendous issues of futurity itself were dwarfed beside the contemplation of her wrongs and wretchedness. What he had done now was

merely another drop added to that cup of bitterness which he was always holding to her lips. As it happened, he had unconsciously caused it to run over ; that was all. As she turned to leave the room, she saw the bank-note lying on the table. She picked it up with a gesture of abhorrence, as though it were some infectious rag. It was a note for a hundred pounds. She felt that he had had no intention of entrusting her with any such sum; that he had thrown it at her without thought, out of his unaccustomed superfluity, as one might inadvertently, out of a full plate, throw to a dog meat instead of bone. For an instant she held it in both hands, with the evident intention of tearing it in pieces, when suddenly a reflection occurred to her. 'It is not his,' she murmured ; 'it is the Canon's.' And folding it neatly up, she placed it in her purse, and went upstairs.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ABANDONED.

THOUGH Robert Aldred had announced his intention of seeing 'with his own eyes how things were going on in Albany Street,' he did not on his arrival in London drive thither directly. He had as modest a confidence in his own powers as concerned business matters as the Canon himself, and it was clear to him that his influence with Sophy would be much less than that of his father. He wisely resolved to take no action without the approval of Frederic Irton, of whose judgment he had the very highest opinion, and therefore drove straight to that gentleman's office in Bedford Row. Irton received him

with great cordiality, but with a serious air. To his apologies for troubling him about what might after all turn out to be of no great consequence—referring to Sophy's letter to the Canon—he answered unhesitatingly, 'You have done quite right.'

'Do you really think then that she is on the brink of some desperate step?'

'On some decisive step she may be,' he replied, thoughtfully; 'the desperation will be the other way—I mean upon her husband's side.'

'But will not that involve her in peril?'

'Undoubtedly, if certain precautions had not been taken. He is like some wild beast over whom a net has been thrown. It is scarcely visible to him, and seems slight enough, but if he attempts to escape, to struggle——'

'But if he finds he cannot escape,' interrupted Robert, apprehensively, 'is there no fear of his doing mischief to innocent people ;

those who are within his power, and whom he may confuse, perhaps, with his enemies? I am prejudiced, of course, but it seems to me that this Adair is a sort of man who will stick at nothing.'

'That is so, or rather, I should say, he has become so. One does not become a villain, even though one may commit a villainy, upon a sudden. I have had this reptile under the microscope for months, and it is amazing how he has developed in tooth and claw. He was always that way inclined; his face from the first was set as though he was going to the gallows. Still, if things had turned out well with him—if luck, that is, had favoured his speculations, which were specious and likely-looking enough—it is my opinion he would never have gone wrong, except morally (for the man has no principle whatever). He would have died worth a plum, the chairman of innumerable companies, and much respected by the majority of his

fellow-creatures—that is, by all those who didn't know him. But he met with disasters from the first, and repaired them with the nearest means that came to hand, and they were foul means. Once on that road, the descent is easy.'

'Do you think he has done anything absolutely criminal?'

'Certainly. He has been on the verge of such crimes—or at all events of one crime—as convince me he must have committed intermediate ones, without the faintest scruple. He has become the immediate associate of the vilest wretches—this man Dawson, for one, whom your fellow-travellers in the railway carriage so injudiciously mentioned. What you overheard on that occasion has been of great service in our investigations. We have found out all about the S.S. mine. It is the notorious San Sobrano silver-mine, concerning which such revelations have been recently made. Your two friends had just returned

from South America, on a confidential mission. They had been "salting" the mine. There is a warrant out for Dawson's apprehension upon a much more serious charge—but, as regards the mine, there is no doubt that Adair is implicated. He was unable to raise the money to float it, on which the promoters depended.'

Here a cab drove rapidly up to the door, and the office bell rang with violence.

'I should not wonder if that was some news about our friend,' continued Irton, with his finger raised for silence. 'Clients, unless, indeed, they are ladies who have suffered wrong, do not try our bell wires so severely.'

'Are you expecting news about him?'

'Not this morning in particular—but it must needs come soon.'

A clerk entered with a card in his hand. He gave it to his employer, who passed it on, with a significant look, to Aldred.

‘Good heavens! Irton; it is the man himself.’

‘Yes; I think I can guess what he has come about,’ returned the lawyer, grimly; ‘sit down at yonder desk with a pen in your hand, and you will hear what the gentleman has to say for himself—show him in, Mason.’

The next moment Adair was ushered into the room. He looked pale, as he always did, but with a difference; his colour was leaden, even to his lips. He might have been a corpse but for his eyes, which, after an angry glance round the room, fixed themselves like two burning coals upon the lawyer.

‘You are not alone,’ he said; ‘what I have to say to you must be said in private.’

‘The gentleman yonder is in my confidence,’ returned Irton, coldly. ‘If you object to his presence you can say what you have to say in writing. I will not see you alone.’

‘You are afraid, are you?’ sneered Adair.

‘Not the least, since I am neither your wife nor your child.’

‘Ah! your words convince me that I am on the right track. Since you *will* have a witness, so much the worse for you. I am here to say that you have committed an infamy.’

‘Indeed! I do not confess it, but I admit that you should be a good judge of what is infamous.’

‘Where are my wife and child?’ exclaimed Adair, passionately. ‘They have been lured away from home by your machinations. Where are they?’

‘I cannot tell you!’

‘That is a lie. With your witness there, it is, perhaps, actionable to say so. No matter, I repeat it again.’

‘You can do so without fear, sir,’ answered the lawyer, indifferently; ‘one does not bring civil actions against criminals.’

‘Criminals! That is of a piece with your

whole behaviour to me ; you have gone about defaming my character. Wherever I turn I find you have been beforehand with your " Do not trust him." '

' As for instance? Can you give me an example, Mr. Adair? '

' There is Dr. Woodruffe, for one. '

' What! do you dare allude to that transaction? Then I admit it. I told him something which caused him to put the insurance company on their guard. And now, in your turn, answer me this ; where did you propose to yourself to get the twelve thousand pounds requisite for floating the San Sobrano scheme? '

Adair answered nothing ; his white lips moved a little, and he moistened them with his tongue.

' Did you not, at a monstrous premium, insure your sick child's life for that sum? '

' What of that? ' murmured Adair, hoarsely. ' The law had nothing to say against it, and therefore no one had a right to complain. '

‘That does not always follow, Mr. Adair. This gentleman here, whom you have taken for one of my clerks, may claim to be an exception to that rule.’

Robert rose, and confronted Adair. ‘My name,’ he said, ‘is Robert Aldred, the son of your benefactor whom you have robbed and ruined. You have marred my future likewise ; yet let me tell you that I do not loathe you for the wrong you have done to him and me so much as I despise and detest you for your cowardice and cruelty to your unhappy wife.’

‘Ah, I remember,’ said Adair, contemptuously, ‘you were one of her old flames. A pretty sort of connection for her husband to be schooled by. Of course it would have been a nice thing to have kept her money in the family, only she preferred somebody else.’

‘That was not you, you cur,’ said Aldred ; ‘she married you out of fear.’

‘You seem to know a great deal about my

domestic affairs,' answered the other, scornfully.

' We do, interposed Irton, in solemn tones, ' more, much more, than you have any idea of. We know, or, at least, *I* know, not only how you have treated your wife, but how you have attempted to treat your child? Do you remember what happened on the day that Dr. Newton called to see her?'

' I remember he did see her.'

' Yes, but something else. The thing I speak of had happened before, no doubt ; but not often. There were not many opportunities for it to happen, though you never let one slip. One offered itself that day ; you made an excuse to leave your wife and the doctor below, and returned to the nursery alone.'

Here Adair, who had been standing up throughout the interview, began to tremble. He stretched out his hand like one who gropes in the dark, and placed it on the back of a chair.

'I have no recollection of the circumstance you mention,' he murmured, huskily.

'I know some one who can refresh your memory. When you entered that room you made a slight mistake.'

'It is possible,' answered the other, eagerly; 'the room was darkened; there were several bottles on the table.'

'Who said anything about bottles? That is a most damaging admission on your part. It was no mistake you made with *them*, however; you had done the same thing too often for that. The mistake you made was in concluding that *there was nobody in the room.*'

A cold sweat broke out on Adair's forehead; he swung from side to side like a drunken man, and would have fallen to the floor but for the chair-back, which he clasped convulsively.

'Jeannette was below with the rest,' he murmured, after a long pause.

‘She was, but there was another person in the nursery behind the curtain. It is lucky for you that you are not in the dock at this moment, for your face would hang you. For my part, there is nothing that would give me greater pleasure than to see you there ; but we are not all like you, we sometimes deny ourselves a personal gratification for the sake of others. It is for another’s sake, in order that your innocent child may not have to say to herself, “ My father was a convicted felon,” that I give you this warning. You are in danger of the law. To-morrow may be too late for escape ; you must leave England to-day.’

Again the dry lips moved, but without speech ; he bowed his head, however, in token of acquiescence.

‘Have you money—money, I mean, sufficient to take you across the Channel?’

Adair lifted a trembling hand and touched his breast-pocket.

‘To be sure,’ continued Irton, drily; ‘I ought to have known that you would have feathered your own nest in any case—now go. If you take my advice, you will not return to Albany Street—there may be people there on the look-out for you.’

Without a word, without a look—for he did not raise his eyes from the ground—and with a fumbling for the handle of the door as if it were dark and it were hard to find, the man shambled out.

‘What a despicable hound!’ exclaimed Robert. ‘It makes me feel humiliated and unclean even to have been in his company. How could my dear father have been attracted to such a person?’

‘Five years of greed and fraud change a man pretty completely, Robert. His ways were always shift; he told me a lie the very first day I ever set eyes on him, but he was not then like yonder creature. Where is now cunning there was then intelligence; a fellow who might have been tutor of Trinity, one

day, like dear old Mavors. All the wits in the world will not keep a man straight who is born crooked. No, he was not like that, at one time. I remember Henny herself took his part against me, at first.'

'But what has he done? How comes it that you have such a hold upon him?'

'He thinks I can prove something, which, as a matter of fact, I only know and cannot prove.'

'How abject he looked, Irton! I never saw conscious guilt put on so debased a form.'

'You are mistaken there, Robert; it is not the consciousness of guilt, but the fear of its consequences, which has so paralysed him. He has got plenty of ill-gotten gains in that breast-pocket of his, and when he once gets abroad and finds himself out of the reach of punishment, he will lift up his drooping head again and start afresh on his road to the Devil.'

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE FLIGHT.

WHEN John Adair left his home and laid that injunction upon his wife to pack up all that was necessary for departure within a few hours, he was not disobeyed. She had been in readiness for some such emergency for many days. Even that idea of his of an invalid carriage for little Willie had been in some sort anticipated. In less than two hours after he had left the house everything was prepared for flight, including arrangements for the transport of the sick child. There was haste, but no precipitation, and, above all, no fear. When Irton said to Adair, 'If you take my advice you will not return to Albany

Street, there may be people on the look-out for you,' he had not spoken less than the truth ; he referred to people in Sophy's interest. There had been help within call next door for weeks. Adair had held his liberty on sufferance, and would have been arrested on the instant had despair or fury driven him to menace Sophy or the child. 'A masterful inactivity' had, however, been the policy which had seemed to Irton better than any other. Sooner or later, as he had foreseen, it would become necessary for Adair to leave the country ; and though a warrant had been taken out against him, at the lawyer's instigation, it was held in suspense, since to execute it would have been to precipitate exposure, and to cover the innocent with life-long shame. If Sophy had known of what Stevie had witnessed in her nursery, it would have been impossible for her to be patient ; she would not have permitted little Willie to remain one hour beneath her husband's roof.

It would have been difficult to persuade her that the cancelling of the insurances which had been effected upon the child's life had put all further attempt upon it out of the question ; nay, it had rendered little Willie's existence of the highest consequence to Adair as being the only asset—though it had hitherto proved impossible to realise it—except Sophy, which he possessed.

It is not every absconding bankrupt who is so solicitous to hamper himself in his flight with wife and child, but to Adair they were really very precious. If anything should happen to either of them the survivor would be simply invaluable, since, with the exception of that store he had in his breast-pocket—which if everybody had had their rights (a Utopian and optimist phrase, quite unsuited to practical life) would certainly not have been there—he would have no other source of income.

It is difficult, therefore, to underrate the

sense of loss which Mr. John Adair experienced when, on coming home at one o'clock (he had one virtue—he was punctual), he found both wife and child had flown. He had a notion at first that they might have preceded him to the railway station—that they were 'not lost, but gone before,' but the parlour-maid assured him to the contrary. 'Missus and Miss Willie, with Jeannette, had gone two hours ago,' as she supposed, to join him ; she was loud in her admiration of the vehicle which had conveyed the child away in an easy and recumbent posture, and apparently in high spirits. As to their destination, Jeannette had given out that they were 'going to the sea ;' a rather vague address, even supposing it was a correct one, and one which certainly did not satisfy the inquirer. As a matter of fact, Sophy had no more knowledge of where they were going than had the parlour-maid. Jeannette, who had long been head of the intelligence department as

regards all outside matters, was now commander-in-chief. From the moment when her mistress informed her of the injunctions her husband had laid upon her she took the conduct of everything into her own hands.

‘Do not take on about it,’ she exclaimed, ‘my dear Miss Sophy’ (in moments of excitement she always thus addressed her mistress, notwithstanding that she had been twice married), ‘for this is only what we have been expecting, or something like it, for ever so long. We will take the dear child away, safe and sound, a couple of hours before master returns ; and, if he ever sets his eyes on either you or her again, I’ll forgive him.’

To anyone who knew Jeannette and the feelings which animated her with respect to her employer, this alternative seemed improbable enough.

‘But where are we to go, Jeannette, whither my husband cannot follow ; and

what friends have I—though it is true I have good friends—who can protect me against the strong arm of the law ?’

‘As to that matter,’ returned the waiting-maid, confidently, ‘I have reason to believe that master has something to settle with the law upon his own account ; so that, for once and away, it will be found on the side of the weak. While as to friends, you have got one, Miss Sophy, that loves you as well as I do—loves you more than you have any idea of, only, for the present, she doesn’t wish her name known—so let’s call her Johnson.’

‘I have only one woman friend, Jeannette—save dear Aunt Maria, whom I myself have rendered powerless to help me—and that is Mrs. Irton. I have done harm enough to those who love me already, and nothing will induce me to accept any help which may bring Henny into trouble. Why, the first place your master’ (it was very significant that she should have avoided saying ‘my

husband' when speaking of Adair) 'will turn to look for us will be her house.'

'To any question where you and little Willie are gone, Mr. Irton can, I assure you, lay his hand upon his heart and honestly say—though, being a lawyer, he would say it, of course, in any case—that he knows nothing about it. Don't trouble your head, my dear Miss Sophy, about anything but packing your things.'

Their preparations for departure were proceeding, indeed, throughout the conversation, during which Jeannette maintained an air of confidence that was not without its effect upon her mistress. Poor Sophy's one idea was to get away with her child from a miserable home and a hateful husband, and she was willing enough, without much questioning, to entrust her future to such faithful hands. The vigour and animation which had taken possession of the waiting-maid—though, to do her justice, she had always 'kept up' for Sophy's

sake under all their troubles—were remarkable. She was like a good soldier, who, tired of inaction, at last receives the route. Nay, there was something even bellicose about her, as though war had been declared ; and, indeed, the idea of battle was by no means unwelcome to her. Next to the preservation of her mistress and little Willie, the thought nearest to her heart was that it was about to be permitted to her to pay off old scores with Mr. John Adair.

She had been in slavery to him for six long years, and the hour of emancipation and revenge had come at last. Intrigue was her delight, she had a natural bent for it (though straightforward enough in every other direction, she was a little crooked in that); but, up to this time, her diplomacy, so far from being successful, had filled her with remorse and regret. Moreover, she had had no coadjutor, her mistress had had enough of deception, and only in one thing had played

into Jeannette's hands. They had agreed together to conceal the fact that little Willie had recently taken a decided turn for the better. As this circumstance, however, for certain excellent reasons, had been hidden from Adair, his proposition that the sick child should be carried from her bed to take a railway journey had, in Sophy's eyes, lost none of its brutality. It acted as a spur to the alacrity with which she prepared to leave her husband's roof. Such a sense of enfranchisement and relief took possession of her as she drove away—her hand fast locked in little Willie's, who lay stretched at ease by her side—that for some minutes she forebore even to speak, like one who is recovering from some long and acute disorder, and who finds happiness enough in being quit of pain. She was content to enjoy her freedom in silence.

Presently, however, she inquired of Jeannette whither she was taking her. 'To a

cousin of mine out Hammersmith way,' explained the waiting-maid. 'Of course it would not do to stop there, though you would be as welcome as flowers in May; master would soon find out where the invalid carriage dropped us, but after that I flatter myself the scent will be cold enough.'

'And then are we going on to this good Mrs. Johnson's! as you call her?'

'Yes; it's her cottage as has been got ready for you.'

'What care and trouble you must have taken, Jeannette,' murmured Sophy, gratefully.

'So I had need, ma'am,' was the waiting-woman's reply. The tone, as well as the words, were significant enough, but Sophy was too wrapped in her own thoughts to pay attention to either. The hour in which the captive breaks his chain is even more critical than the one in which it first was riveted on him; the beginning of a new life, however

preferable it may seem to that which we have done with, is momentous.

After a long drive, they drew up at a house in a very modest terrace where Jeannette's cousin—a homely, matronly woman—gave them a hearty welcome. Some tea and refreshments were put before them, of which Sophy could hardly be persuaded to partake, so afraid was she of pursuit and capture. In twenty minutes they were again on their way, this time in one of those flies peculiar to the suburbs and country towns. Their way lay now clear of the streets, among villas and market gardens. At last they stopped at a pretty cottage, with bay windows looking over a well-kept lawn bordered by flower-beds already redolent of the spring. Little Willie was enchanted with their colour and perfume.

‘Dear mamma, I should like to live here all my life,’ she whispered, softly.

‘You shall live here as long as you like, you dear,’ said Jeannette.

To Sophy, as to the child, though for a different reason, the prospect seemed too alluring to be realised. 'It looks most sweet and quiet,' she whispered. 'But shall we be safe, Jeannette?'

'Do you see that building yonder, Miss Sophy, with the ivy round it; it is only a stone's throw, and we shall be secure under its shadow.'

The suburb was one of those highly decorated ones which are certainly exempt from the charge of monotony of architecture; each house was not only different from the other, but often distinguished by some startling peculiarity of its own. Even the churches were less ecclesiastical-looking than artistic. 'Is it the church?' inquired Sophy, not without some doubt in her mind of even the security of the proximity of the sacred edifice, against the machinations of her husband.

'The church! Lor bless you, no, Miss. It's better nor that; it's the police station.'

It was plain that Jeannette put greater confidence in the power of the secular arm than in ecclesiastical authority.

A neat, cheerful woman having the appearance of a housekeeper received them, and showed them over the cottage, which was very prettily furnished ; the nursery arrangements were exceptionally pleasant and appropriate. When tired little Willie had been put to bed, and was lying asleep watched by the two fond women, Jeannette expressed a hope that her mistress had found things to her liking.

‘I dare not say what I think,’ said Sophy. ‘I feel as though I were looking upon something far too restful and beautiful to last—like sunset in the skies. To whom am I indebted for this charming haven? in which, however, it is out of the question, Jeannette, that we can remain. You don’t understand that in leaving Mr. Adair I have deprived myself of the means of livelihood.’

‘I am not so sure of that, Miss Sophy ; at

least, those who know a great deal more about such matters than me are not so sure. But, however that may be, don't you fret yourself about the cost of things. Money will be provided—at all events for some time to come—by one whose greatest pleasure will be to spend it upon you.'

'It must be Henny,' murmured Sophy ;
'dear, generous Henny!'

'Mrs. Irton is as good as gold,' returned Jeannette, earnestly, 'and her purse will be the same as yours, I warrant ; but just at this moment Mrs. Irton don't even know you're here.'

'Then who is it, Jeannette?'

Sophy's face flushed to her forehead. It had suddenly struck her that Mr. Mavors was her unknown benefactor, and then the shame of having entertained such an unjustifiable suspicion overwhelmed her. It was probable, indeed, that the Tutor had forgotten all about her, or, if he had thought of inquiring, had

heard perhaps, not altogether without complacency, that the man she had preferred to him had turned out to be not altogether the best of husbands.

‘If I tell you who it is, Miss Sophy, I shall be doing the very thing the person in question—Mrs. Johnson, as I have called her—wishes me not to do.’

‘I am very much obliged to my unknown friend, whoever she is, Jeannette,’ returned Sophy, resolutely ; ‘but I cannot consent to be under obligations to a stranger, or, what is worse, to some one who may be returning to me good for evil.’

Her mind had reverted to Aunt Maria. It was highly improbable, of course, that that lady should possess the means for any such act of generosity ; but, at all events, as Sophy was well convinced, the will would not be wanting to her : when we cannot find what we search for elsewhere, we look for it in unlikely places.

‘Well, Miss Sophy, I will do your bidding if you will, on your part, listen with patience to something I have got to say about myself, and when you have heard it try your best to forgive me.’

‘I have nothing, alas! to forgive any one, my poor Jeannette; throughout my life things have been quite the other way.’

‘You have done some foolish things, no doubt, Miss Sophy,’ returned Jeannette, naïvely; ‘and grievously have you suffered for them. Your marriage with Mr. Perry was, of course, the beginning of it all; but still your misfortunes might have been ended there but for my meddling. But for me you might have made a clean breast of it to the Canon, and at least prevented matters from going from bad to worse.’

‘No, Jeannette; no,’ put in her mistress, mournfully; ‘I had not the courage for it; anything seemed easier to me than to tell the truth.’

‘ You were hesitating about it, Miss Sophy, at all events, and I threw all the weight I had with you into the wrong scale. I did not know it was the wrong one, but I ought to have done, had not my eyes been blinded by the glitter of gold. Miss Sophy, I was bribed by Mr. Adair to help him.’

‘ Bribed ! Oh, Jeannette ! ’

‘ Yes, Miss Sophy, well you may look at me like that ; only don’t suppose that I was betraying you. I have thought the matter over a hundred times since then, and though I take blame and shame to myself, it was not so bad as that. I never put wrong into your head, but I was enticed by Mr. Adair’s money to encourage you in what was not right. You were always a liberal mistress to me ; Heaven knows I had not the excuse of want ; but Mr. Adair was very free-handed, and thinking it was generosity and not self-interest (as, of course, it was), I endeavoured to persuade myself that such a man could never make a bad husband ; what I was more certain of,

however, was that he would make a lavish master. Nor in the last (though generosity had even less to do with it than before) was I mistaken. And here, dear, dear Miss Sophy, lies the bitterest shame of all. I took his money for years for seeming to be on his side against your dear self and little Willic. There was some excuse even for that, for in deceiving him I was enabled to remain your friend. But when the sums he gave me—at the very time he was telling you he had no money—became larger and larger, my heart sank within me to think what villainy I might in his eyes be abetting.’

‘I don’t understand, Jeannette,’ said Sophy, pitifully. ‘Perhaps it is only just that I, who have deceived others so dear and near to me, should have been myself deceived. What could he do, as you say, against us more than what I know he did?’

‘Don’t ask, Miss Sophy ; I beseech you, don’t ask. It was not what he did, but what

he tried to do ; and as I knew, in my heart of hearts, he gave me the money to hold my tongue about it. It was bad enough to take what dear Miss Aldred gave me when you married, "as a remembrance of my faithful service under her roof"—mine, who had thrown dust in her eyes from the very first, and at last sold her darling to a scoundrel ; but to take blood money !'

'Blood money !' echoed Sophy, aghast with horror.

'Well, it was almost as bad, though I didn't know how bad ; and when I took it I had no other idea in my mind, Heaven knows, than to thwart and hinder him. And I did stand between him and the little darling, dear Miss Sophy, and would have laid down my life sooner than have let him injure a hair of her sweet head. Thank Heaven ! you never knew of it, and I do beg of you not to seek to know, at least from my lips. Mrs. Irton, who knows all, will tell you, perhaps, some day ;

she does not think that I was so much to blame. And you have been yourself in straits, Miss Sophy, when it was difficult to know what was right.'

'Indeed, indeed, I have, Jeannette,' put in her mistress. 'I have no right to cast a stone at any human being for acting crookedly. I am sure you meant well (which I did not); and if you stood between my child and harm, I am your debtor for ever.'

'Oh, no! no! Nothing that I can do, Miss Sophy, can ever make things that way,' said Jeannette, vehemently. 'But if—out of the thought of happier times, and the knowledge that I have loved you and yours from first to last, and because you see a miserable creature on her knees before you—you can forgive me——'

'Hush! hush! you must not kneel to me,' interrupted Sophy, greatly agitated. 'If I have anything to forgive you, of course it is forgiven.'

‘I thank you for that blessed word, Miss Sophy,’ cried the sobbing girl. ‘I draw my breath for the first time freely for the last five years. While life is in me, I will do my best to repair the misery I have brought upon you; I will work for you and little Willie as no woman ever worked before.’

‘You dear, faithful creature!’ said Sophy, tenderly. ‘At present our fortune is in the clouds, through which, however, let us hope some streak of sunshine may presently find its way. But you have not yet told me what you promised : how is it we are lodged in this pretty place? Who has made these arrangements for our comfort? How did we get here with such ease and safety? Who but Henny could have done it?’

‘Mrs. Irton could have done it, Miss Sophy, no doubt,’ returned Jeannette, gently; ‘but it was so all-important you see, that neither she nor her husband should know anything about your whereabouts when Mr.

Adair makes his inquiries of them, as he is sure to do.'

Sophy cast an involuntary glance at her sleeping child, and shuddered.

'I see, of course, the absolute necessity of that,' she said; 'but things do not happen in this world according to our necessities. If Henny has not been our guardian angel in this matter, who can it have been? Who is good Mrs. Johnson?'

'There is no guardian-angelship and no sort of goodness about her,' returned the waiting-maid, vehemently. 'All that you see here are the mere proceeds of her wages of iniquity. But such as she is, she is Jenny Perkins.'

CHAPTER L.

THE CONFEDERATES.

WHEN he once found himself abroad and out of the reach of immediate danger, Irton had said of John Adair that he would hold up his head and be himself again. Nor did it require the air of the Continent to revive him. Miserable as was his aspect as he slunk away from Bedford Row, he seemed, like Antæus, to gather strength and confidence with every footfall. He had been in a good many ugly holes, it was true; and, what was worse, Irton was aware, it seemed, that he had been on the brink of one which, as compared with the rest, was as the Bottomless Pit itself. He had suffered a terrible penalty for having

been so near it, the thought of which had utterly quenched his spirit ; but, on reconsideration, he now felt assured that there was no intention on the lawyer's part to pursue that matter to the bitter end. This might arise, as Irton had said, from an unwillingness to disgrace those belonging to him, or from the difficulty of establishing the charge ; and, if the latter, the sooner he left England, and the longer he kept away, the less likely it was to be brought home to him. Who the witness of his attempted crime could be, Adair could make no guess. Perhaps there had been no witness ; though the suspicion against him must have been strong indeed to have induced the invention of such testimony. But it was evidently resolved by his enemies (as he termed those whom he had wronged and ruined) that he should either fly the country or make acquaintance with the dock of a criminal court ; and there was no hesitation on his part which to choose. He had

already been contemplating flight on other grounds ; and should he be arrested, no matter on what charge, his seizure would be the signal for half a dozen other prosecutions. He had long been prescient of this evil day, which nothing but the success of the San Sobrano scheme (which had come to the ground with a crash that could not be stifled) could have staved off, and had made his arrangements accordingly.

As even a small income can be made to go a good way if we are deaf to the claims of others, and spend every penny of it upon ourselves, so even among the ruins of failure there is money to be picked up by the unscrupulous ; and Adair, as the lawyer had foreseen, had feathered his nest pretty completely, or, in other words had laid his hands upon everything that could be realised and turned it into portable property. Whenever he touched that breast-pocket of his, he experienced a pleasurable glow which with

some people is the substitute for all generous emotions—the consciousness of the possession of capital. For all that had come and gone, he still had a complacent confidence in his own natural abilities. Backed by the experience of the last five years—which, though acquired at great cost, had nevertheless been paid for by other people's money—he felt himself capable of great commercial enterprises. These, however, would be of a different kind from those with which he had hitherto been connected, and which had failed (as he persuaded himself) by the pusillanimity and want of enterprise of others. His own hand and brain should for the future direct them ; and, in particular, he would take care to separate himself completely from these coadjutors, or rather confederates, with whom perforce he had of late consorted. He would put them to one more use, and then have done with them.

It was in company with one of these—

the man Dawson—that he was about to leave England that very evening ; and by him all arrangements had been made for that purpose. Dawson was not only aware that Sophy and the child were going with Adair, but had suggested their doing so. He knew all their circumstances, and had pointed out how important it was to his future prospects (in which Mr. Dawson flattered himself he would have some share) that he should keep his wife and his daughter (whom he playfully termed the goose and the gosling with the golden eggs) under his own eye.

‘ If you once leave your wife,’ he naïvely said, ‘ her own people will get round her, and you will find it difficult to reopen relations with her ; ’ and as her income was paid into her own hands, this would be obviously inconvenient.

There were certain circumstances which rendered it injudicious for Adair to be seen travelling in a railway carriage in the direc-

tion of the sea-coast ; while for Mr. Dawson such a step would have been still more hazardous. It had therefore been settled that Mrs. Adair and the child should journey to Gravesend alone, while her husband and his confederate were to drop down the river at night and join them in the morning. A boat, manned by a crew whom they could trust (*i.e.* who were well paid for the job), was to await them at midnight by the stairs at the bottom of Miller Street, where Dawson had some place of business. The two men, though united by the band of common interest, were far from being on good terms : their natures were antipathetic. Dawson was a coarse and brutal ruffian, whose society could not but revolt a man of education, however morally degraded ; he enjoyed himself after his fashion, which Adair never did ; but he was not a whit less suspicious and cunning. It had been agreed that they were to meet together at a water-side tavern in the East of London

that afternoon, to make their final arrangements, and thither Adair now bent his steps.

The rendezvous itself was characteristic enough of one of the two men ; a rickety erection with beetle brows (like a villainous low forehead), its wooden walls bulging on the river and overhanging, at low tide, mud and slime ; the haunt of profligate and noisy sailors. Adair, who though unscrupulous, was fastidious in his way, surveyed the place, which he had never entered before, with a shudder of disgust. As he walked down the narrow lane of which it formed the termination, his heart was full of bitterness. The old houses almost meeting over his head as they leant forward in age and weakness, made a shadow above him, which, though there was no other point of likeness, Heaven knows, suddenly reminded him of the lime walk at Trinity. Six years ago he had trodden it in cap and gown ; a man of mark and promise,

with a future before him, and now he had become the companion of thieves. Without one pang of remorse, he felt an excessive repugnance to the thing he had become; a pent-up fury raged within him against circumstance, fate, whatever it was that had brought him to such a pass. It was not his own fault, of course; the knave out of luck is seldom aware that he has chosen the very worst profession in the world; he only knows that he is 'cursed unfortunate.' What most excited his wrath was the fact that his own flesh and blood had deserted him, though they had in fact only escaped him. Next to them, he loathed the man to whom it had become necessary to disclose that humiliating circumstance.

He found Dawson awaiting him in a bow-windowed room looking on the river, smoking a pipe, and drinking hot brandy-and-water.

'Punctual, as usual, Master Jack,' was

his familiar address. 'That's well ; sit down and have a glass.'

'No ; I have neither time nor taste for drinking. Matters are getting hot for us, Dawson. For my part, I wish we were well off.'

'It is always safer—which means quicker—to wait for night, when it comes to running. Besides, the men have their orders, and could not be got together all in a moment. What has happened to frighten you ?'

'I have reason to believe that there are people looking for me at home.'

'Indeed!' said the other, laying down his pipe and dropping his careless manner. 'I hope you have got your women folk well away.'

'They are not coming,' said Adair, sullenly ; 'they have fled the house, and I don't know where they have gone.'

'Come, come, Mr. Adair!' exclaimed his companion, menacingly ; 'this will not do.'

Miles Dawson is not the man to be made a catspaw of.'

'I tell you I know no more than you do where my wife has gone. I wish I did know. It's more my loss than yours, I suppose.'

'If it is your loss ; but how am I to be certain of that ? You are not so very straightforward that I should take your bare word for it. We sink or swim together, my young friend, mind that. It is very well for you to have a certain income safely invested in this country to be drawn upon at your convenience ; but what's to become of me in the meantime, while our schemes are ripening. While the grass grows the steed starves ; and I am not the sort of animal that takes to starving kindly.'

'I have money enough for both of us for a month or two,' said Adair, with a flush on his face.

'Oh, you have, have you ?' sneered the other ; 'in spite of its being so deuced diffi-

cult to raise a few pounds ? Well, if I don't see my way to a thousand pound down, I don't start to-night, Mr. Adair.'

'A thousand pounds ! I wouldn't give you a thousand pence to save your neck from the hangman.'

It was not a pleasant observation for one gentleman to make to another supposed to be in his confidence ; moreover, it was accompanied by a tone and manner so obviously genuine that to explain it away in any 'parliamentary sense' was out of the question.

For an instant a very ugly look indeed crossed Mr. Dawson's face, which, when the coarse *bonhomie* was out of it, was always far from prepossessing, but the next moment he burst out laughing.

'Upon my life, Adair,' he said, 'for a keen, clever fellow, I never saw one so slow to take a joke as you are. You need hardly have flown out so, even if an old pal like me had asked for the money in earnest, whereas I asked you for nothing of the kind. I said

I should like to see it ; since without the sinews of war it would be useless to begin our campaign at all, and we might just as well stop where we are and take our chance.'

For an instant Adair seemed to hesitate, then he threw open his coat and pulled out his bundle of bank-notes.

'There is a thousand pounds there, and more,' he exclaimed, sullenly. 'Now, look here, I'm safe till-to-morrow ; but don't let's have any more cursed nonsense about not going to-night.'

'Certainly not,' returned the other, quietly. 'Only there is nothing like being frank and above-board with friends.'

If this moral axiom was meant as an encouragement to his companion to go into figures, it failed of its intent, for Adair rolled up the notes again, and placed them in his breast pocket.

'At midnight, then, at Miller Street stairs, the boat will be waiting?'

'As sure as death, or at least clockwork,' was the dry rejoinder. 'As you can't go home, it seems, why shouldn't we pass the time together?'

'No, I have something to do,' said Adair, taking up his hat.

'Well, don't be late; but, on the other hand, it won't do to be much too early. To be hanging about the stairs before the boat arrives will excite suspicion.' With that curt, sidelong nod which is the sign of adieu between familiars who are not friends, the two parted. Hardly had the door closed behind Adair, when Dawson stamped twice upon the floor, a signal which was promptly answered by the younger of the two men who had been passengers in the train with Robert Aldred.

'Quick, follow that fellow, and tell me where he goes to.'

Within five minutes the emissary returned, with a long face.

'Fool! has he given you the slip?'

‘It is not that ; there’s some one after him already.’

‘Ten thousand devils ! not one of our people, surely?’

‘No such luck, it’s a detective. I’ve seen his face in Scotland-yard, and, what’s more to the purpose, he’s seen mine.’

‘You white-livered hound ! No matter, that will do.’

Left to himself, Dawson fell a musing. ‘He’s safe for to-night, is he? That means that they are conniving at his flight ; for Madam’s sake they will not arrest him. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband. A thousand pounds? He had five thousand pounds about him if he had a penny. I caught the figure on the inside note ; they were hundred-pounders.’

It was not easy to find a cab in those water-side regions ; but, when he had done so, Adair drove to an hotel in Covent Garden—the same he had put up at when he had come up from

Cambridge to make that little investigation at St. Anne's—and secured a private sitting-room. A bedroom he did not need, and to sit in the coffee-room among strangers would have been intolerable. He had in reality nothing to do, for his arrangements for departure were complete ; but a sense of danger—marvellously increased by the little fortune he carried with him—warned him to lie close, as it had disinclined him for his late companion's society. The time lagged on his hands like lead ; there were two books upon the table, and, though he had never taken any pleasure in reading, he carelessly took up one of them. It chanced to be a Cambridge Calendar, left, no doubt, by some undergraduate who used the house. He turned to his own name, second on the list of Wranglers. The sight of it was wormwood to him. What chances he had flung away ; from how high a promise he had fallen, and to what a depth ! He threw the book away with a curse,

and took up the other. It was a Post Office Directory. He turned to his own address in Albany Street, and in the City. In the next edition, he bitterly reflected, they would not be there—nor anywhere. It was doubtful whether he would ever dare to set foot in England again ; yet if Sophy and her child would not obey his orders, and come out to him, he *would* dare ; and then so much the worse for them. As he idly turned over the leaves he read a page of ‘trades ;’ then, half closing the book, repeated the names in their order, with only two mistakes. He read it again, and this time accomplished the feat without an error. What an amazing memory he possessed, what grasp of mind, and talent for detail ! It was impossible, with the funds he had to start with, that he should fail a second time in utilising such gifts.

He dined, or rather supped, at a late hour, and at a little before eleven started for the rendezvous. Bearing in mind the warning

Dawson had given him against being too early, he went on foot, notwithstanding that it was raining heavily. There was also a strong wind blowing. This reminded him of the night when he dogged the footsteps of Herbert Parry when they came away from the ball.

There was another point of resemblance of which he was unaware ; his own footsteps were being dogged, and with much greater cunning ; he had been but an amateur detective, and this was a professional. Along the Strand and Fleet Street, and then into the narrow thoroughfares by the river-side, this man pursued him—save that he always kept upon the opposite side of the way—like his own shadow. At the corner of Miller Street Adair stopped and took out his watch. It wanted but five minutes to midnight. Then he turned the corner of the street and made rapidly for the river. His pursuer, seeing him pause, had slunk into a gateway, and,

taken unawares by his rapid movement, was thrown more behind him than he had been heretofore. When he also turned into the street, which was of no great length, Adair had almost reached the bottom of it, when he suddenly lost sight of him. The detective hastened his steps, and quickly reached the very spot, as he imagined, where Adair had disappeared. It was a large warehouse, with a huge crane depending from it, and its huge doors were closed. It was impossible, he felt, that they could have been opened and shut within so short a time. Yet the man was gone. The detective placed a whistle to his lips and gave a shrill signal, twice repeated. Within three minutes there were two policemen, with their bull's-eyes, assisting him in his search. He told them hurriedly what had happened, and one of them ran on to the river brink. As he reached it, a light boat, with six men in her, four of them rowing, and two in the stern, shot out from under the stairs.

‘He has got away, sir,’ said the policeman, running back to make his report, ‘in a ship’s gig down the river.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said the detective. ‘He never moved a yard beyond this spot,’ and he struck his foot upon the ground. The sound it gave was dull and hollow. They were standing on a cellar trap.

CHAPTER LI.

WILLIE'S WILL.

WEEKS elapsed before the secluded home which Jeannette had found for her mistress received any visitor. Security from the pursuit of her husband was the one aspiration of her soul, and while that remained in doubt she was unable to enjoy the full fruition of her freedom. The quiet of the place and its environments, the scents and sounds of spring, the marked improvement which the change had already effected in little Willie, filled her with joy and thankfulness; but from this new-found happiness, the sense of its transient character—the possibility of some misfortune befalling her worse than all that she had hereto-

fore endured—was never absent. Jeannette could not be persuaded to speak further of the peril which had hung over little Willie ; but although her ignorance of business affairs prevented her from understanding how her darling's death could have benefited any human creature, Sophy knew that her child had been in danger, and from the hands that nature itself should have taught to defend her.

Under these circumstances, and looking to the fact that while Irton and his wife could conscientiously aver that they were unaware of her place of concealment, her husband, even with the law to back him, could scarcely discover her, she enjoined upon Jeannette an absolute silence. The two women and the child were as absolutely cut off from those who had an interest in them—kindly or otherwise—as though they were in ‘some summer isle of Eden, where never comes the trader nor floats the European flag.’ For utter isolation there is nothing, indeed, like your

London suburb ; where gentility reigns supreme, and into which not even the criers of the 'latest intelligence' think it worth their while to penetrate. These voluntary exiles knew nothing of what was going on in the world, and their dearest hope was that that ignorance should be reciprocal.

Everything, however—including murder—comes out at last, and Mrs. Johnson, under which name Jeannette continued to conceal her identity, received one morning a startling piece of intelligence through the butterman. He did not tell it her with his lips—the news was too stale for that—but brought it by accident, in print, wrapped round a parcel of the 'best Dorset.' It is a method by which imaginative literature, alas ! is often conveyed ; but this was a matter of fact. There had been a time when Jeannette would have gone straight to her mistress and discoursed of the sensational incident with infinite gusto : but the poor waiting-maid had lost her nerve ;

she had no longer any confidence in her own judgment ; and so far from rejoicing, as of yore, in handling the ribbons of an intrigue, could hardly drive a gig as a free agent. She did, however, take certain steps, the result of which was that two ladies—the elder in deep mourning, the younger in that attire which the milliners describe as one of ‘mitigated grief,’ presented themselves the next morning at the cottage. At the sight of the former, Sophy uttered a piteous cry, and ran into her stretched-out arms.

‘My darling !’ murmured Aunt Maria (for she it was) ; ‘welcome, welcome to the old haven !’

‘No, no ! not that,’ sobbed Sophy ; ‘I have no right to it.’

And, indeed, though the well-springs of love and gratitude were at the full with her, she had sought the refuge in question only to hide her face in shame and sorrow.

‘That is not your Aunt Maria’s view,’ said

Henny, coming to the assistance of them both—for, in truth, it was needed—‘though she and I have certainly a bone to pick with you, dear, for having hidden away from us for so long. We knew, of course, since Jeannette was in charge of you, that you must needs be safe.’

‘No, no, no!’ interrupted Sophy, in affrighted tones; ‘not safe; that is what embitters every moment to me. As for me, I do not deserve to be safe from him, but I tremble for my innocent child.’

The two visitors exchanged significant glances.

‘Dismiss that fear from your mind, dear girl,’ said Aunt Maria, assuringly; ‘there are none but friends about you now, nor will there ever be.’

Sophy shook her head.

‘How did *you* find me out?’ she answered, vehemently. ‘He can do as you did; he is cunning and very patient in evil-doing. Once,

when I was quite a child, I lived in the country ; I saw a poor tired hare running through a wood, and many minutes afterwards a slim, cruel stoat following on its track. That is how it will be with us. Sooner or later, poor little Willie and I will be overtaken and devoured.'

'But I tell you, dear Sophy, it will not be so,' urged Henny, confidently. 'Do you think that I would deceive you in a thing like that, or speak so positively if I was not quite sure?'

'No, Henny, I don't think that ; you believe in what your husband has told you. He has found out, perhaps, that the law is upon our side ; and so it may be. But he doesn't know the man he has to deal with : what is law to *him* ? He does not even fear God Himself. A man without natural affection, and without mercy.'

'Hush, hush !' said Henny, imploringly. Again the two women looked at one another ;

they had agreed together, it seemed, upon some course of action, but were now doubtful as to its advisability.

‘Had we not better tell her?’ whispered Henny, over the still bowed head. But ere Aunt Maria could nod assent Sophy had started from her embrace with an affrighted cry.

‘Hark! hark!’ she cried. ‘A man’s voice in Willie’s room; he has found us out, and has come to murder her.’

Before either of her companions could put out a hand to restrain her she had rushed from the room to the upper floor. The others followed as quickly as they could. Sophy’s ears had not deceived her; there *was* a man in the room above, where the child lay, sitting by the side of the child with a huge picture-book in his hand, which she was regarding attentively. An old man in deep mourning, but with a face of quiet content and exquisite tenderness. Little Willie and he were

obviously on the best of terms, and she was prattling away in the most confidential and heartless manner. For once the mother's face did not turn first to her darling; she flung herself at the new comer's knees and burst into tears.

The Canon caressed her in silence for some moments. He had no great confidence just then in his own powers of speech, and when he used them was careful to avoid too pronounced a tone of tenderness.

'You mustn't give way like that, my dear Sophy,' he said, reprovingly. 'We shall have the Court of Chancery down upon us for frightening the Settiky Trust.'

And indeed that important little personage looked amazed enough at her mother's emotion. 'I was told to wait below till Aunt Maria had prepared you for my visit,' he went on; 'though why I should have become such a formidable person to you I'm sure I can't tell, but I thought in the meantime I

would renew my acquaintance with my godchild.'

Still Sophy did not speak. She had got hold of one of the Canon's hands, and, in spite of his efforts to withdraw it, was kissing it, to his intense embarrassment.

'My dear Sophy,' he went on, 'I am not the Queen, nor yet the Pope. But if you do really attribute to me any superiority or authority I entreat of you to rise, and—dear me, I am not used to have ladies kneeling to me, but ' (here was a spasmodic attempt at his old smile) 'quite the contrary. We have had a bad time all round ; there's no doubt of that, and of late weeks,' he added, with a deep sigh, 'the worst of all.'

'Good heavens ! what has happened afresh ?' cried Sophy, starting to her feet. 'You are in mourning, and Aunt Maria is in mourning too. It is surely not dear Robert ?'

'No, no ; thank God, it is not he,' said the Canon, earnestly ; 'but we have lost an

old friend—a friend who was dear to all of us, and to whom you, Sophy, were especially dear.’

Sophy put back her hair from her eyes, a familiar gesture, which brought her back to the Canon’s mind more than anything had yet done, for she was greatly changed. The expression of her face was that of bewilderment. For the moment—so little of reciprocity there is sometimes even in devoted love—she was unable to recognise the loss of which he spoke. Then in a trembling voice, and with a faint flush, she murmured, ‘It is not, I trust, good Mr. Mavors.’

‘Yes, he has gone from this world to a better ; but this world would have been a better world to him if things had turned out differently as regards yourself, Sophy. I was blind to it, but Aunt Maria was not ; he sent to her when he was dying, and told her all about it. His last words were a blessing upon you ; the dream of his heart was that

you should escape your unhappy fate ; and his prayer has been answered.'

'Is my husband dead?' inquired Sophy, in trembling tones.

'Yes, don't ask about it just yet ; you shall know all in time. You are no longer a bond-slave ; yes' (her eyes had turned to little Willie with yearning and thankfulness), 'and your child is safe ; henceforth she will be yours without fear.'

Once more Sophy fell on her knees, but this time not to the Canon. There are times when even to the tenderest hearts the loss of our dear ones is a source of happy release, and a cause for thankfulness. A melancholy gratitude, indeed ; but this was a case infinitely more deplorable—that of a woman who recognised Heaven's mercy in the blow that cut off her husband in the midst of his sins.

'And the past,' said Sophy, solemnly, taking the child's hand in hers ; 'some repara-

tion for even the past can now be made. We have thought a good deal about godpapa and how he has been treated, have we not, Willie?’

The Settiky Trust, sitting very high up in her little bed, well propped by pillows, nodded adhesion. ‘I have left godpapa all my money,’ she said.

‘Good heavens! what does the dear child mean?’ inquired the Canon, with a distressed look.

‘It is quite true,’ said Sophy, gravely; ‘my darling and I are both of one mind in the matter. Her chief anxiety, when Dr. Newton came to see her, was to know whether she would live to be twenty-one, because I told her that she would then be able to repay you all that you had been robbed of.’

‘And if I was to die in the meantime,’ said little Willie, ‘I should like to leave it to him.’

‘I don’t suppose your good husband, Henny,’ said Sophy, smiling, ‘would think

very much of the validity of the will of a child of six ; but, at all events, it shows the "intention of the testator." '

With that she produced from her desk the document in question, written in a large round hand.

'There was no undue influence,' said Sophy, 'though I admit that I sometimes steadied her wrist, not that we can't write,' she added, with maternal pride, 'but because we were so very weak at the time. Indeed, it was when we thought that we should never get well and strong again that we did it.'

The Canon sat with this juvenile testament spread out before him, as reverently as though it had been an original MS. of Milton. The two women stood looking over his shoulder making pretence to read it, but their eyes were too full of tears.

'This is the last will and testament of me, Wilhelmina Adair, spinster,' it ran, in due legal form, and bequeathed 'all my worldly

goods, of whatever kind, to William Aldred, my godpapa.'

'And where on earth did Willie get all this legal knowledge?' inquired the legatee.

'Jeannette had a sixpenny book of general utility,' explained Sophy, 'among the contents of which was the form of a will. She and I were the witnesses, but you will please to observe that the signature is Willie's own.'

'I did that all by myself,' remarked the testator, with complacency; 'mamma did not guide my fingers.'

'We thought that might invalidate the bequest,' said Sophy, smiling.

'It is worth a good deal more than if it was valid,' cried the Canon, enthusiastically. 'It ought to be in the College library with the "Paradise Lost."'

'Unhappily, however,' sighed Sophy, 'it is only a proof of good intentions. When I said that some reparation even for the past was now rendered possible, I was alluding, my

dear guardian, to the interest of the money that has been stolen from you ; only a small portion of it will now be necessary for our needs, and the rest will, of course, be paid you as we receive it ; but, as to the principal, I don't see how it is ever to be refunded.'

' You may make yourself quite easy upon that score, my dear Sophy,' said the Canon, with tender gravity ; ' for, as a matter of fact, it *has* been refunded.'

' What — what — did the person who wronged you of it repay——'

Astonishment and incredulity checked her utterance.

' Why, no, my dear,' put in the Canon, drily ; ' it was not quite that way. The money came indirectly from your hands. Our friend Mavors had, in fact, left you a large sum. His lawyer tells me it had been originally intended for the College, but that some time ago—hearing that matters were not going prosperously with you—he made a

new will. Then quite lately he saw Robert, and for the first time was made acquainted with the matters in connection with my trusteeship—how the money had to be paid twice over, and so forth.'

'Good heavens! How vile and base he must have thought me!'

groaned Sophy.

'Quite otherwise, my dear; he esteemed you so highly that he at once understood the sorrow and remorse you were suffering, from having been made the instrument of my ruin. He felt that if he left you this money the first use you would put it to would be to repay me; but that under the circumstances you would not have the power to do so, that your husband, in short, would have prevented it. That it would have been like pouring water into a sieve. He therefore bequeathed the 15,000*l.* that I had advanced to you to myself, taking care, however, to explain to Aunt Maria why it was done. He felt as sure as if he had consulted your own wishes that such

a disposition of his property would be satisfactory to you.'

'Heaven bless him!' murmured Sophy, gratefully. 'He has lifted a burden from me which I should otherwise have carried to my grave.'

'That was the very feeling for which he gave you credit,' put in Aunt Maria, softly. 'He read your heart, my dear, though he could not win it.'

'It was never worth his winning, Aunt Maria,' she answered, bitterly. 'I was not fit to be the wife of an honest man.'

'Nay, nay!' said the Canon; 'if it comes to honesty I shall have little to say for myself. Not only has the sum been bequeathed to me which was evidently intended for you, but Mavors has left money to my boy Robert. Myself and family have become receivers, as it were, of stolen goods, well knowing them, as Fred would put it, to have been stolen.'

‘Then Robert will be able to marry the girl of his choice!’ exclaimed Sophy, delightedly. ‘He will no longer have reason to accuse me of having wrecked his happiness.’

‘If it has been wrecked, it must have been amply insured,’ smiled the Canon, ‘to judge by his face when I last saw him. He has telegraphed for his Alma, who will be at “The Laurels” in a week’s time.’

‘But I thought you had left “The Laurels” —been driven—elsewhere—all through me.’

‘Tut, tut! let bygones be bygones. Money that makes the mare to go has the same effect (if judiciously administered) upon a tenant. We have gone back to the old house, Sophy, and to the old ways; only one thing is wanting, we must have our Sophy back in her old home.’

‘No, no, that can never be,’ she answered, bitterly. ‘She can never be your Sophy again, the Sophy that you once believed her to be.’

‘ Well, of course, there will be some difference, said the Canon, smiling. ‘ There’s the Settiky Trust to be taken into account. What does little Willie say to coming down with mamma to live with godpapa and Aunt Maria ? ’

‘ Willie will come, only Jeannette must come too,’ said the child, with the air of one who confers a favour, upon conditions.

‘ Come, there’s judgment without appeal,’ cried the Canon, exultingly. ‘ Neither you nor I, my dear, require Fred Irton to tell us that the Settiky Trust always has everything her own way.’

‘ Perhaps—in time, dear guardian,’ said Sophy, hesitatingly.

Which was a promise.

CHAPTER LII.

IN PORT.

WHEN Sophy went down to Cambridge, she was in deep mourning ; but the heaviness of heart within her was caused by the sense of her own unworthiness, and not by her recent loss. The notion that the death even of the worst of husbands is a matter of regret is a very general one, and is recorded on many enduring substances—tombstones. But the truth is that there is no relation in life which can hold its ground against persistent wrong-doing. That of the dead we should say nothing but good is an excellent maxim ; but, unfortunately, it takes too much for granted—namely, that there is some good to

say about them. Of John Adair it might, indeed, have been stated that he had an excellent head 'for figures ;' but even that eulogium, since it included the art of falsifying accounts, was of a doubtful value. For my own part, I never feel the slightest regret when offensive persons of my acquaintance are removed to another sphere (of course I may be mistaken in my estimate of them ; but, in that case, it is a consolation to feel that they are gone where their merits, which escaped my limited observation, will be appreciated) ; and therefore I cannot blame poor Sophy that she felt so little sorrow for her bereavement.

Some distress and pain, however, she did feel by reason of the manner of his departure. John Adair, it was generally understood, was murdered. He was found dead under that cellar flap in Miller Street ; and ' the theory ' of what would have been ' the prosecution,' had there been anybody to prosecute, was as

follows. Mr. Dawson, as has been mentioned, had an establishment in this street, which consisted, however, only of certain underground premises used for storage—probably of stolen goods. When Adair so indiscreetly exhibited to him that parcel of bank-notes, it came into his mind that he would rather go abroad with ill-gotten gains than with the possessor of them, from whose custody he might (and doubtless would) have had some difficulty in extracting them. With the aid of a confederate, he therefore planned a simple scheme for acquiring them ; the only thing necessary to the success of which was that Adair should take the right hand of the street. There was no reason, indeed, why he should take the left hand ; but if he had chanced to cross the road, the scheme would have been a failure. In that case, Adair would have simply walked down the river stairs where the boat was awaiting him ; as it was, instead of embarking on the Thames, he crossed the Styx.

Dawson's confederate on the other side of the way was thought to have given some signal for the bolt of the cellar trap to be withdrawn just as Adair stepped upon it, when, as we know, he suddenly disappeared from the sight of the detective. At all events, he was found there dead, and with only a few shillings in his pocket ; and within five minutes the boat was hurrying down the stream with six men in her instead of seven. I have not a word, of course, of excuse to offer for Mr. Dawson. His conduct was undoubtedly reprehensible ; but, on the other hand, I have not the faintest sympathy for his victim, who himself, as we know, would have sacrificed an innocent life without much scruple. I must confess, indeed, to experiencing a certain satisfaction when thorough-paced rogues fall out and rid the world of one another. I fail to be touched with the burning indignation with which informers are just now regarded. They seem to me

most useful people. And as for this Mr. Dawson—who will, no doubt, come to be hanged in time, with all due propriety—in his rough and ready and, so to speak, extra judicial fashion, he certainly made life worth living for some honest folks, to whom it had become well-nigh intolerable.

Sophy was received at 'The Laurels' with open arms, but not at all like a returned Prodigal. Matters were made to go on as much as possible exactly the same as they had been used to do; those half a dozen years of absence and misery were treated as though she had been away on a week's visit, and was now come home again. So many stitches cannot, however, be dropped in the web of life without leaving a very ugly hole. The contrast between what was and what had been was sharp and clear to her, for all their care, as a jagged rock against a summer sky. Bitterest of all were her reflections upon the what might have been. Even for Sophy's

sake Robert could not conceal his love when Alma came—a girl dutiful as beautiful, tender as pure, born for the admiration of all, for the devotion of one. Not one spark of jealousy of her glowed in Sophy's bosom ; but in her supreme happiness she recognised all that she herself had so recklessly thrown away. She did not envy her as the chosen bride of an honourable and worthy young fellow—' all these things had ceased to be ' with her as though she was on her dying bed, but for the gifts which made her so precious in his eyes ; some of these, at least, she had had in her own power to bestow, and she had flung them into the gutter. Young as she still was in years, the joys of youth were already over with her ; it was as though she belonged to two generations back, and for the future could only hope to find her happiness in the happiness of others.

And she did find it in them. In whatever relation of life she had gone astray, no fault

was ever found in her as a mother—except indeed that Mrs. Helford pronounced her to be too indulgent, a weakness she called Heaven to witness she had never given way to in the case of her own sainted boy. Even if this charge was true, however, no harm came of it ; for little Willie not only became in time strong and well, but a blessing to all about her. With Henny Irton—who, although she never bore a child, was a mother to many—Willie was the chief of all her favourites. Her affection for the little lassie prompted her, indeed, to such lengths—such as kidnapping and deportation to Maida Vale—that Sophy had sometimes to remind her that, after all, the child was hers, and to threaten to invoke the protection of the law, through Mr. Frederic Irton, solicitor ; the fact of Master Stevie Helford's services, however, being retained upon Henny's side made the recapture of the Infant always difficult. Willie's admiration of him, which was quite recipi-

cated, though in a very different fashion, was something unique in a young lady of such very tender years. Mrs. Helford, however, who, to do her justice, was very fond of Willie, did not think it inexplicable. 'My dear Henny,' she would say, 'that little dot of Sophy's is a born flirt, like her mother before her.'

In no other respect, however, did Willie show the least sign of heredity ; unless, indeed, it is maintained by the believers in that convenient theory that peculiarities of disposition can be handed down from a godpapa. In her dislike to figures and her predilection for poetry she resembled the Canon, who entertained an extravagant regard for her.

Sophy's past was never alluded to in her presence, not even by Jeannette ; but the latter's devotion to her mistress and child (far beyond what is usually exhibited even by the most faithful of 'retainers') bespoke the remorse she felt for such hand as she had had

in it. She too has received a lesson which renders intrigue and duplicity impossible to her for the rest of her days.

The Canon and Aunt Maria are as reticent behind Sophy's back as when her still pretty, but sad and sobered, face reminds them of the light that has fled from it. Certain painful memories can never be dismissed from their minds, but their gentle natures shrink from the discussion of them. It is not so, of course, with the world at large; and many hard things are said of Sophy by those to whom the sight of the bruised reed always suggests the desire to break it. Her own sex (with certain exceptions I need not name) are especially hard upon her.

'You may say what you like, ma'am,' said old Dr. Newton, in reply to one of these censors; 'but I maintain that with even an average husband that girl would have turned out the best of wives, as she is the best of mothers.'

The character of Mr. John Adair, we may be sure, was handled with still greater freedom ; but even he had his apologist.

‘If he hadn’t got into bad hands,’ Mrs. Helford was wont to say (a shibboleth which the good lady used with reference to most scoundrels, in unconscious extenuation, perhaps, of her own sainted offspring), ‘he would have been an honour to his profession, whatever it was. I am sure, when I first knew him, he behaved himself with the greatest propriety.’

To which her son-in-law would reply, with an injured air, ‘I can only say that the very first time I met him he told me one of the most——’

At which point Henny would place her dainty little palm on her husband’s lips, and cut short the well-worn accusation.

Irton always asserts that his wife is the only woman in the world who has ever sympathised with Burns’ aspiration, that even

'auld Hornie' may somehow or other get out of his difficulties, and find all forgotten and forgiven; and, in truth, she is one of the tenderest souls that ever 'wore earth about her.'

After Robert's marriage he returned to India, from whence, at intervals, two baby boys were forwarded to the care of Grandpapa and Aunt Maria; it is needless to say that they were received with rapture, but they never put little Willie's nose out of joint in the affections of the Canon.

'Boys may come,' he was wont to say, as bending over some picture-book together, he mingled his silver with her golden hair, 'and even girls may come; but they will never come between me and the Settiky Trust.'

And they never did.

THE END.

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